

Interview: Pick 'n Pay Strike

In the early hours of Tuesday May 13 Pick 'n Pay management finally reached a settlement with the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) - for an increase of R85 per month across the board - which will cover some 13,000 of the company's employees. After three months of negotiations the union and the company deadlocked at a dispute meeting, with the union demanding R95 per month across the board increase and the company offering R52 per month. On the eve of the strike the management's offer was increased to R80, whilst the union demand was for R90.

The settlement came after a conciliation board hearing and seven days of industrial action which saw a strike develop into sit-ins, sleep-ins and shopfloor demonstrations. Some 6,500 workers were involved from 55 stores throughout the country. At the height of the action some 21 outlets were closed. This was the most costly strike to hit the retail sector up to the present. The strike will cost the company an estimated R7m. This was also the largest and most widespread workplace occupation to occur so far in South Africa. The chairman of Pick 'n Pay, Raymond Ackerman, charged the union with pursuing a political strike designed to make the country ungovernable, and to bring down the retail trade. He also accused the union of using violence during the strike. Also sections of the capitalist press charged the union with having acted irresponsibly: the amount of wages lost during the strike could not be made up by the additional increase gained by going on strike, said the Financial Mail (16.5.86).

The SALB asked CCAWUSA for its side of the story. Below we publish an interview - conducted immediately after the strike - with Jeremy Daphne, a negotiator employed by the Johannesburg branch of CCAWUSA.

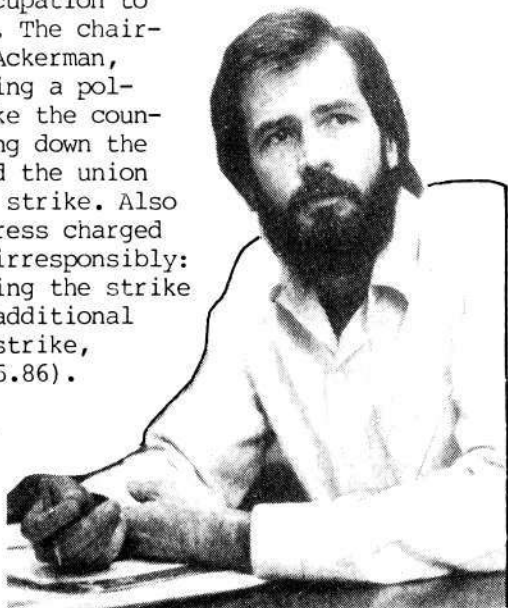


photo by Tony Naidoo (Business Day)

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SALB: How do you answer the charges made by Mr Ackerman that the union used violent methods?

Jeremy Daphne: I can only refer to our union's statements refuting these charges. Thousands of our members took part in a peaceful and highly disciplined industrial action. Incidents were usually sparked off by rude and threatening behaviour by customers, vigilantes, police or management. Workers in Carletonville store were teargassed by management late one night, which led to serious friction and subsequently all members of management being suspended. Another example were the incidents at Kingsburgh, Natal - of bottles being broken and fists flying between shoppers and strikers, stoning of management's cars and company vans etc. - which all began when one white customer barged into a group of strikers. We believe that management over-reacted massively when workers decided on shopfloor demonstrations, including placards, marches, singing etc. This is certainly a new strategy - which workers themselves devised - but it is peaceful protest and we believe that such demonstrations are a legitimate and correct form of industrial action carried out in the process of persuading management to see reason. Management simply over-reacted when workers asserted their right to protest.

I think you have to remember that in the retail strike you have this extra dimension - the customer - there on the spot. Workers had to put up with racist insults, with customers phoning the police, and the fact that the vigilante element had direct access. In one Johannesburg store demonstrating workers were confronted by 12 "customers" all pointing guns at them. In a Krugersdorp store workers were physically attacked by customers.

Even after the strike Ackerman kept up the propaganda with such statements as: "Had the strike not been resolved, stores would probably have been set alight and lives lost". We repeat that the workers have conducted themselves in a disciplined fashion and the union is proud of this.

Ackerman's statements were another contributory factor. His statement for example that the strike was politically motivated and so forth caused a lot of anger amongst members and definitely contributed towards making the dispute more volatile. His statements and advertisements after the settlement claiming that the strike was broken and so on very nearly started another strike and our members exercised considerable restraint to not start again.

SALB: What about the charge that this was a political strike?

Jeremy Daphne: This is more propaganda. Ackerman has spoken about making the country ungovernable, bringing down Pick 'n Pay and of radicals. We are used to the Le Granges and Bothas attributing all problems to agitators. Now Pick 'n Pay is using the same language.

This does not mean that CCAWUSA is non-political. The union is fully committed to addressing the political issues which affect its members, and to an active involvement within the community with full links between the union and community organisations, and to participating in the broader political arena. However, our recent disputes - at Pick 'n Pay and Foschini - have been over low wages and retrenchments. The issue at Pick 'n Pay was wages - before the strike the minimum wage was R303 per month. Even now the minimum is only R388. The press has pointed out that Pick 'n Pay wages are higher than some other chains - but they are only marginally higher and they are certainly not the highest payers in the retail sector, for example we have just negotiated a R554 minimum with one firm. There is a history of exceptionally low wages in the retail trade and if management is not prepared to improve these wages through negotiation it should expect strike action.

SALB: Evenso Pick 'n Pay and Raymond Ackerman have had a very high profile "liberal" image in terms of national "reform" politics and in terms of shopfloor benefits for workers. Why then was the strike so bitter?

Jeremy Daphne: To start with we believe that Pick 'n Pay's caring liberal image is a result of a skilled public relations department and not a result of actual shopfloor conditions. It's a myth as any Pick 'n Pay worker will tell you: "Ackerman likes to go around shaking hands with us but this means nothing. We have never had the opportunity to speak out our views and management knows nothing about our shopfloor needs and problems" - is a statement often made by Pick 'n Pay workers. Pick 'n Pay might look good on TV or in the capitalist press but it is a very different story on the shopfloor. Ackerman's statements during and after the strike is typical of the kind of attitude that workers have to put up with.

The answer to the question as to why the strike was so bitter is simply that it was a reflection of workers' total shopfloor experience of Pick 'n Pay. In terms of shopfloor benefits workers are not interested in any co-determination schemes such as share own-

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ership schemes, and other benefits - such as education and housing loans - are out of the reach of most workers due to their low wages. What workers are interested in is a living wage and they are still nowhere near receiving this.

I would add one thing on the company's "liberal" image. Our members have found that Pick 'n Pay managements adopted a racial response to their industrial action. White scabs particularly were brought in. Some of our members - whites, "Coloureds" and Indians were approached separately and encouraged to return to work - a clear attempt to divide workers along racial lines.

SALB: There was evidence that racial divisions did become prevalent during the strike. What is being done about this?

Jeremy Daphne: What I can say is that we have already told our members that they must be tolerant of non-strikers and they must take advantage of this victory to educate them and get them fully involved in the union. The union's future plans include a commitment to break down racial barriers and to build unity amongst all sections of the working class.

SALB: Let us turn to what actually happened during the strike.

Jeremy Daphne: This campaign posed a major organisational challenge to the union. The industrial action involved sit-ins, sleep-ins and demonstrations in some 55 stores situated all over South Africa. Only the Western Cape was not involved. Stores in as widely dispersed places as East London, Kimberley, Bloemfontein and Nelspruit were involved. Workers in all 55 stores operated in unison, starting the sit-ins at the same time and carrying out sleep-ins and demonstrations of various kinds. The union offices, nationally and in the regions, proved equal to the task but the real organisational force and coordination came from the workers themselves. This is an indication of the level of development of shop steward structures, the high degree of worker shopfloor independence and effective communication networks set up by the workers.

Our members' discipline and organisation was evident even before the strike. Originally the strike was to have started on Friday May 2, but was then suspended when the union was threatened with Supreme Court action by management. Despite the short notice postponing the strike all members held back until they were in a position to take legal strike action. Similarly, the return to

work after the strike was a strategically good decision and was unanimous and disciplined in its implementation.

At store level the conduct of the strike was in the hands of the workers themselves. They drew on their own resources - friends and families - to ensure food and supplies for the duration of the occupation. Although the basic campaign was laid down by the national shop stewards committee there was plenty of room for local initiative; the shopfloor demonstrations were one example of this. In each store sub-committees were established to deal with questions of food, safety, to send delegations to other stores and union offices etc. Daily programmes were drawn up and kept to strictly. Waking, eating and sleeping times were established and kept to. Activities of an educational nature were organised in the evenings and marshalls were elected to keep order.

There was a squad of shop stewards moving from store to store to monitor the situation. In other words the sleep-ins made huge organisational demands on us. But this was one of the gains of the strike: the union and the membership - using its own resources - was able to act in unison to conduct a major industrial action in a concerted way. This says a lot about the involvement and commitment of our membership.

SALB: The capitalist press has said that the union leadership acted irresponsibly. The company's well-being and workers' jobs were risked - all for an extra R5,00. Workers are worse off now than they were before the strike. What is your answer to this?

Jeremy Daphne: In the first place a union - unlike a company - is a democratic body. The members make the decisions - in this case there was an 80% vote for strike action. This particular battle with Pick 'n Pay was about wages - and the members decided what figure they would accept. The decision to proceed to industrial action when the parties were R10 apart was a sound one, and taken on the shopfloor. When workers are earning wages of the order paid by Pick 'n Pay then R10 extra per month is a lot of money.

The decision was taken on the basis of the low wages of the workers, the healthy financial position of Pick 'n Pay and the unreasonable attitude of the company towards the union's demands. The final outcome of the strike marks another step on the road to a living wage for all workers. The increase is a permanent one and cannot be calculated over 12 months as the Financial Mail did.

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Pick 'n Pay acted irresponsibly by refusing to accede to a wage demand that they can easily afford. One only has to look at Pick 'n Pay's resources and the Ackerman family's R229,7 million stake in the company to realise that Ackerman's press statements during and after the dispute were also highly irresponsible and immature.

As in other successful campaigns conducted by workers the union and Pick 'n Pay membership also made other important gains: management now knows that they face an organised and determined workforce - and they are going to have to recognise that fact and show respect for their workers and their needs. The strike has shifted the relations of power in favour of our members.

Since the dispute we have received hundreds of new applications for membership. I have already said that the union has benefitted organisationally. Levels of organisation have been increased and workers' confidence in themselves has been boosted. A whole new layer of leadership emerged during the strike. All levels - office holders, shop stewards and members - came forward to take up their place in the struggle.

The Financial Mail - apart from being clearly biased - exhibited a very similar attitude to Pick 'n Pay top management, having little or no conception of what the real situation was on the shopfloor. Other sections of the press - such as the Weekly Mail and The Citizen - also exhibited a similar attitude, indulging in biased and shoddy journalism.

SALB: Why did the union not call a consumer boycott against Pick 'n Pay?

Jeremy Daphne: We had devised a programme of industrial action - only the first phase of which was the strike, sit-ins and sleep-ins, and this was implemented. Without a settlement action would have been escalated. In the end this was not required - although action was already being planned in Australia - with regard to Pick 'n Pay's store there.

SALB: How would you sum up the Pick 'n Pay dispute?

Jeremy Daphne: Overall, the most important aspect was the unity, commitment and courage displayed by Pick 'n Pay workers in the face of enormous opposition and psychological warfare. It was a victory for working class organisation and leadership.

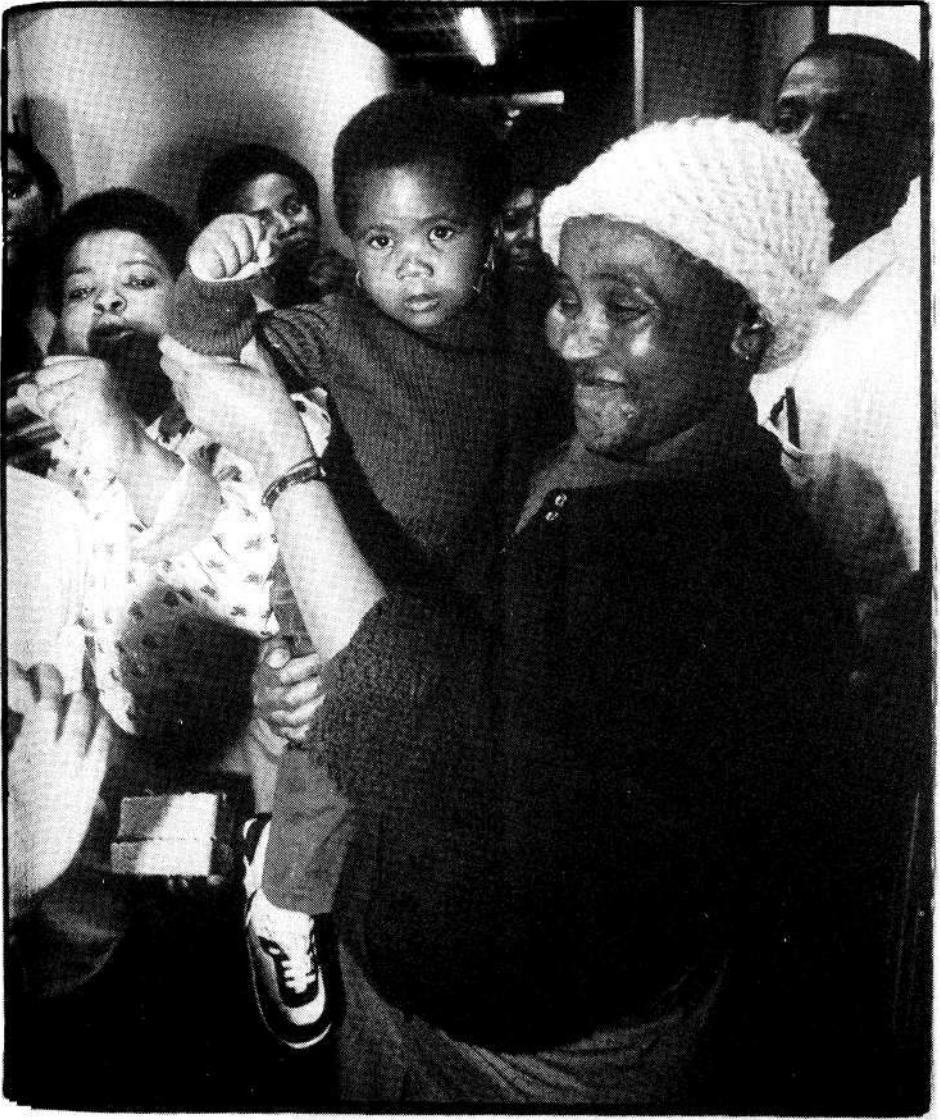


photo: worker and child sitting-in at Norwood Pick 'n Pay: part of the plan to make the country ungovernable, according to Ackerman.