

STRIKE AT S A BATA COMPANY - FEBRUARY 1984

Georgina Jaffee interviewed one of the participants in the recent Bata strike for the SALB.

A recognition agreement between the S A Bata Shoe Company in Pinetown Natal (a subsidiary of the large Canadian Bata Shoe Co.), and the Leather and Allied Workers' Union (LAWU), an affiliate of the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU), may be imminent.

LAWU insists that they have a paid up membership of 1150 out of a total workforce of 1563 in the 3 plants in the Pinetown industrial complex. The present negotiations follow a series of disputes and a violent strike in February which lasted 10 days. The strike broke out over wages, working conditions and the demand for the recognition of the Leather and Allied Workers Union. The Bata workers were dissatisfied with the established TUCSA affiliated National Union of Leather Workers.

The strike began in the rubber section of the main plant at Manchester Road on 17th February and within 3 days it had spread to the other Bata factories at Henwood Road and Trotter Road. According to press reports, Bata's Chief of personnel for Africa, a Mr Livermore, and a Canadian lawyer joined local Bata management and strikers' representatives for discussions.*

The following interview was conducted with one of the workers at Bata who recently resigned as shop steward in the National Union of Leather Workers and joined SAAWU's Leather and Allied Workers' Union.

SALB: What were the main details of the dispute?

Bata worker: On Wednesday the 15th February the

*Daily News 24.2.84

interview

workers in the rubber department were told that two fellow workers, fired in December 1983, would not be re-instated. They were dismissed because the manager said that production was down. The 89 workers in this department were also told that they would not be getting the expected pay increase. On Friday 17th they decided to stop work and some of them went to the SAAWU offices. Later in the day the word spread that wages were not being increased and the workers from other departments joined in the stoppage. By Monday the workers at Henwood came out on strike and then on Tuesday the workers at Trotter Road also joined in. They were all expecting up to 25% increase.

On Tuesday 21st all the workers had gathered outside the main factory gates to find that there were about 40 riot police dressed in camouflage uniforms. They used loud speakers saying that we should go to work by 7.30 or else they would force us away from the gates. It was 7.20 a.m. All the workers refused to budge and the police began attacking us with sjamboks. We dispersed but a number of people were injured and beaten and had to see the doctor. The taxi drivers showed their solidarity and drove many of the workers free of charge to the Church Hall in Claremont which we use for our meetings.

On Wednesday we returned to the factory gates and towards the end of the day a woman was shot in the shoulder by one of the security guards of the company. This perhaps occurred because there were some fights between the strikers and some of the workers who had gone in to work. There were very few of them but it was necessary to teach them a lesson.

On Thursday we again assembled at the gates. The company was still refusing to meet our demands. On this day we were forced to board corporation busses at gunpoint by the police. The company wanted to get the workers away from the gates because some people had arrived from Canada to settle the dispute.

We held another meeting in Claremont and on Friday we were read a letter sent from management which said that they will negotiate if we return to work. We made a decision to return on Monday the 27th. We are still negotiating. The company has asked for proof of our membership. They are also stalling. We get the impression that the Industrial Council for the industry is urging them not to recognise us.

SALB: What are the main grievances?

Bata worker: I mentioned wages. For example there are some workers in the rubber section of the company who have been there for 25 years and they are earning R68 per week. They get a watch for long service but no wages. Some of the women are being paid R33 per week. There is no sick pay or maternity leave - generally the wages are lower than the other companies in the area. The workers also feel that there are no channels for discussing their grievances. The TUCSA union does not represent them. The rules and regulations for bargaining are not carried out. I learnt them when I became a shop-steward but they are never put into action.

SALB: When did you join SAAWU?

Bata worker: I joined SAAWU secretly early this year - some of the other workers joined before this. We all felt that TUCSA was not representing our interests. When the workers join Bata they are told that the union will help them. It has not. SAAWU will try and meet our expectations.