

Metal talks and MAWU's national wage campaign

The first meeting of the National Industrial Council for the Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metal Industries (NICISEMI) in this years wage round, was held on March 10. The MAWU NEC and 200 shop-stewards attended the first session. Unions also taking part in negotiations with SEIFSA (the employers federation) are the Confederation of Metal and Building Unions (CMBU), MAWU's fellow International Metalworkers Federation affiliates (IMF), the Mine Workers Union and the S A Iron, Steel and Allied Industries Union.

MAWU demands for 1987 are:

1. A basic minimum rate of R4 an hour.
2. A guaranteed across-the-board increase of R1 an hour.
3. Recognition of May Day and June 16 as paid holidays.
4. The reduction of the working week from 45 hours to 40 hours without loss of pay.
5. Improved overtime rates.
6. Six months paid maternity leave, plus 14 days paid paternity leave. (See article elsewhere in this edition.)
7. An end to PAYE deductions from members pay.
8. Basic trade union rights (stop-orders, shop-steward recognition and access to company premises for union officials) to be included in the main agreement.

New demands, i.e. an end to PAYE deductions and trade union basic rights have been included in the 1987 demands. MAWU argues that PAYE was introduced to black workers to curb rising government spending on maintaining apartheid. The demand for basic trade union rights was included given the struggle MAWU is engaged in with metal employers who try to bog the union down in lengthy negotiations for a recognition agreement, denying basic union rights in the meantime (see the article on recognition struggles elsewhere in this edition). The union demands to negotiate this issue at national level.

SEIFSA rejected the demands. Their counter-offer was 30 cents increase an hour for unskilled workers to 60 cents an hour for skilled workers. Their proposed minimum rate is R2,52 an hour. However, SEIFSA claims that the present offer is not final. They will offer something better if the unions are prepared to com-

- MAWU National Wage Campaign -

promise the present demands and move further down to reach an agreement with SEIFSA. The next meeting to continue negotiations was scheduled for 15 April 1987.

There is a vast difference between MAWU and SEIFSA's position. Employers are claiming that the unions demands will cost "R1 billion". MAWU believes this is nonsensical. The union claims "SEIFSA has shown what it would cost to meet present demands, but has never shown the total earnings of the industry. If SEIFSA does not have these figures, how do they know the cost of higher wages."

Profits

The union argues that a few corporations which dominate the South African economy, and the metal industry in particular, have been able to swallow smaller and weaker competitors and increased the already huge concentration of wealth and control. The MAWU speech given at the NICISEMI talks on 10 March 1986 sum-up the argument as follows:

Although some of the smaller and weaker companies in the industry have collapsed, the majority of the bigger companies are again reporting record profits, on average the profits reported this year have increased by well over the inflation rate, just look at AMIC, or ALTRON, or DORBYL. AMIC assets, for instance, increased in value by 1100% in 10 years. A recent survey of profits reported by 132 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange reported an average profit increase of 30%.

Huge profits have been realised by "rationalisation" and other cost-cutting mechanism, eg. "flexibility". Many factories have closed. Their machines and orders were absorbed into other factories; workers have been retrenched, made redundant and replaced by machines. Employers have forced workers to operate more than one machine at the same rate. More than 110,000 jobs have been lost in the metal industry since 1982, according to MAWU.

The union has declared its intention to defend members against employers attacks through "rationalisation" and "flexibility" and has called upon all metal workers to engage in struggle if the 1987 National Wage Campaign is to be successful.

Past struggles: the 1986 campaign

The 1986 MAWU National Wage Campaign took the struggle of the metal workers (especially in MAWU) even further. Demands presented in 1986 were as follows:

1. 50 cents increase across-the-board an hour.
2. R3,50 minimum rate an hour.
3. 40 hour week, without loss of pay.
4. Six months paid maternity leave, and 14 days paid paternity leave.
5. May Day and June 16 to be paid holidays.
6. Job security.
7. Right to strike without dismissal.

Throughout the negotiation period workers exerted pressure on individual affiliates of SEIFSA. An one-hour stoppage, followed by an overtime ban and lastly an one-day stoppage took place. This action was taken nationally except for the one-day stoppage (see below). Employers finally offered 32 cents for the unskilled workers as against a much lower initial offer. MAWU viewed this as victory. Umbiko We MAWU puts it as follows: "In 1985 SEIFSA had said business was bad and they only agreed to offer 14 cents an hour increase. In 1986 business was even worse, but they offered 32c. Workers' co-ordinated action forced employers to make this offer." MAWU membership grew from 36,800 to 52,000 during this period according to the union's paper.

An overtime ban - called to strengthen the campaign - had the effect of dividing SEIFSA. On the Transvaal shop-steward council held on 1 June 1986, shop-stewards reported different management response to the overtime ban. Amongst the responses the following were noted as serious attacks by management:

1. Introduction of the 3-shift system.
2. The employment of white or coloured workers.
3. Retrenchments.

Most companies which attempted to introduce the 3-shift system already had some of their departments operating on a 3-shift basis, and this meant that workers in those departments were always working overtime. The ban on overtime disrupted production in such companies, and managements saw the solution as being the introduction of a 3-shift system for the entire factory. Workers responses

- MAWU National Wage Campaign -

included demands for transport for the last shift, improved shift allowances and health facilities - demands that were rejected by employers.

The employment of white or coloured workers was viewed by members as a racial strategy on the part of management. Workers noted that management was prepared to pay higher wages only to white or coloured workers.

Retrenchments were viewed as a means to get rid of the union: "Instead of paying higher wages to MAWU members employers prefer to fine us, and hire other workers who won't join any union and demand higher wages", said a Dorbyl shop-steward.

Most companies that introduced a 3-shift system or hired white or coloured workers withdrew these plans after workers took industrial action. They instead broke away from SEIFSA's tradition of not allowing plant-level bargaining on substantive issues, and at the same time expressed a wish to withdraw from the NICISEMI. MAWU rejected this position for the following reasons:

Because of overtime pressure, some SEIFSA companies are now trying to pull out of the Industrial Council. They are telling workers that they will negotiate only at plant-level. In this way they are trying to divide workers. They want workers only to worry about factory negotiations.

All-level bargaining

The union solution to this problem has been to demand plant-level bargaining on top of centralised bargaining. In fact this has been the principle from the first day MAWU decided to join the NICISEMI (see SALB 8.5). The failure to adequately implement this principle weakened the 1986 National Wage Campaign. Insofar as members were mobilised nationally, (in the initial days of the overtime ban) but were divided as individual employers began to respond differently to the boycott. According to a MAWU organiser on the East Rand, "this confirmed to MAWU leadership that our structures are not functioning properly." Workers don't understand NICISEMI negotiations."

New struggles developed over employers' responses. In Benoni, Denva Metal Workers went on strike after management attempted to introduce a 3-shift system, and rejected workers demands for

transport for night shift workers, an increase in night shift allowance to 16%, and that more workers be employed for the night shift on a permanent basis. Originally only the foundry was working a 3-shift system, other departments were not involved. The strike lasted for three days, after which management withdrew their plans and demanded that workers call off the overtime ban and for negotiations on wages to take place at the factory.

At Sandvik in Benoni, management tried to overcome the ban by employing white workers. MAWU members went on a strike after management attempted to replace black workers with white workers on brazing machines. The strike was also called off after management withdrew white workers and proposed that negotiations take place on a 3-shift system and wages at plant-level.

In Wadeville, Dorbyl Structures and Transport retrenched workers. Management claimed that an overtime ban resulted in penalties being imposed for late delivery of orders by their customers ISCOR, ESCOM, and SATS.

The union was caught in a difficult situation. Companies opened up negotiations at plant-level, while MAWU and SEIFSA were still negotiating wages at the NICISEMI. Workers paid more attention to factory negotiations as a result of being "impatient" with the Industrial Council negotiations, according to MAWU. Plant-level talks on wages took place at different factories and at different times. This was problematic for local organisers as strikes occurred in many factories without having been planned or discussed by the local shop-steward council. During negotiations some workers put emphasis only on wages. Other demands presented to SEIFSA were not followed up. When SEIFSA made the final offer of 32c, MAWU members did not unanimously support the proposed one-day stoppage - as many factories had already settled with their local managements on wages.

Lessons

Clearly, as one MAWU organiser pointed out, not all members understood the NICISEMI negotiations and the significance of demands sent to the Industrial Council. The principle of all-level bargaining also posed a problem.

MAWU's procedure for drawing up demands is as follows: factories send proposals to their respective locals. The locals discuss

- MAWU National Wage Campaign

these and refer their proposals to the BEC. If consensus between locals is reached at the BEC, demands are referred to the NEC. Discussion also takes place at this forum and thereafter a recommendation is referred back to the branches which are expected to endorse the demands.

In October 1986 a national pamphlet was distributed to the shop-stewards. A special shop-stewards council was held whereby shop-stewards were asked to raise discussion at their respective factories as to what are worker demands for 1987. Report-backs were given to the locals and deliberations at local level were then referred to the BEC and thereafter to the NEC. Endorsement of these demands took place at the MAWU Annual General Meeting held on 15 November 1986 at Durban.

How this happens in practice remains to be thoroughly investigated especially with regard to the involvement of MAWU in NICISEMI - a state promoted forum for collective bargaining. MAWU's decision to join the Industrial Council in 1983 was justified on tactical grounds. The union believed that the NICISEMI is the means whereby it can unite demands and mobilise on a mass national basis. (see SALB 8.5) However the 1986 campaign illustrated the problem of mobilising on the basis of all-level bargaining.

The union has tried to overcome these problems this year in part by producing a comprehensive booklet for the 1987 campaign which explains the various demands. The union believes that demands were not properly discussed at the factory level last year. MAWU hopes that the booklet will ensure that an educational process develops even further than last year.

To what extent does the 1986 campaign confirm the argument that has been going on for four years, that the involvement of independent unions in state promoted forms of collective bargaining carries the risk of distancing the union leadership from the shop-floor? Did strikes on wages at different factories and at different periods by MAWU members indicate a rejection of NICISEMI by rank and file members or "an impatience to wait for the conclusion of NICISEMI negotiations" as the union puts it? It remains to be seen what will develop in the 1987 National Wage Campaign.

(Jabu Matiko, March 1987)