

Editorial note

Jabu Matiko has joined the staff of the Labour Bulletin as a researcher. Jabu previously worked for the Metal and Allied Workers Union as an organiser on the East Rand for the last three years.

Potentially the most important development in the trade union movement at the moment is COSATU's call for a national living wage campaign. Whilst this issue is mentioned in some of the articles in the present edition, the Bulletin will be monitoring the campaign on an ongoing basis in the future.

SARHWU: organising SATS workers

The following is an interview with members of the South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union (SARHWU) at the Delmore hostel situated near Germiston. Workers are engaged in organizing other workers for the union. At present the management (South African Transport Services) is refusing to recognize the union. Shop-stewards and union officials have met with harassment and detentions after the union launched a campaign last year to get workers to resign from the management-created Black Staff Association.

Despite this the organizing campaign is still on. At Delmore attempts are not only made at the worksphere, workers are also organized at the homesphere - in this case in the hostel provided by SATS. Workers interviewed are not only members of the recruiting committee, but also form part of the Delmore hostel executive committee established to struggle against bad living conditions.

At present the compound manager uses compound security guards who guard the hostel. Their primary task is to check who gets in and out of the hostel, around the clock. All hostel inmates are supposed to have their hostel permits to gain access. In the past (this has stopped since the inception of the hostel committee) hostel dwellers were forced to spend the night at the Delmore railway station waiting rooms if they failed to produce their hostel permits. Visitors are not allowed. A loudhailer is usually used to call out those who have visitors, and the meeting place is outside the hostel.

- sarhwu -

So far a boycott over the poor quality of food has been organised and at present workers are preparing food for themselves in their rooms. When asked about the significance of the boycott, the local organizer, Mnyamezeni Bwoi, said, "The boycott has unified workers in the hostel, this has resulted in the growth of SARHWU membership in the Delmore area. Workers have begun to identify sites of struggle other than the worksphere; they have confronted SATS functionaries who are exercising control over the hostel inmates. The crucial lesson here has been the connection of SATS management attempts to destroy worker organization and hostel administrators total rejection of worker's attempts to have control over their lives. SARHWU has a hostel committee in Kaserne and New Canada, attempts are still being made to have such committees all over the country where SARHWU is organizing. At this stage coordination is the responsibility of the regional committee of SARHWU. The REC is composed of 10 workers elected from the regional congress and one paid official who is regional secretary."

The interview below was conducted before the outbreak of widespread strike action during March-April initiated from the City Deep depot

SALB: How did you first get to know about SARHWU?

SARHWU members: Last year during May we got pamphlets at Germiston station stating there was a big rally at Orlando stadium; whereby workers will be celebrating May Day. We also learnt from the pamphlet that personalities like Winnie Mandela and Elijah Barayi will be giving speeches. We attended this rally and learnt a lot. Workers songs were sung and speeches were given as the pamphlet stated. On returning to the hostel we found that most workers were at the rally during the day, most have stayed away from work. On that night the dining hall was not characterised by eating and drinking sorghum beer. Workers were singing what they heard at the rally. The next day we went to the COSATU offices in Germiston to find out if railway workers had a union. We were introduced to an organiser of SARHWU. He discussed with us all we wanted to know about SARHWU, afterwards we joined. The organiser told us to introduce other workers to SARHWU as this would make it a powerful union. We took some joining forms back and started organizing at work and at the hostel.

SALB: How did you do this?

SARHWU members: After work, most workers spent time at the hostel's beerhall as there is nothing else to do, except sleep. Our energy was concentrated in this beerhall. We used to go there and started singing worker songs. People would join in the singing but others would stop and ask what all these songs meant. Discussion would take place, in fact, within three days we had already recruited 12 workers, and today membership is approximately 4,000 out of 7,000 hostel residents. More work is still to be done.

SALB: Tell us how you organized at work. Did you face any problems?

SARHWU members: Recruiting at work was difficult due to the way management has organized our work. We don't spend most of our time together. We are doing different jobs and in small numbers, except workers maintaining the railway tracks and electric cables, but even then we did not have contacts in those sections. The other problem was management imposed the Staff Association which pretended it represents the interest of workers, and due to the absence of an alternative organization in the past it was difficult for workers to believe that SARHWU was different from the Staff Association.

SALB: How are living conditions at the hostel?

SARHWU members: At present there are 7,000 inmates at Delmore. They are divided in three kinds of sleeping quarters; those that accommodate 54 workers, 25 workers and the last one accommodates 4 workers. In these rooms there is nothing except one big stove and beds that are made up of iron and wires used as a mattress spring. There is one big kitchen where SATS has employed people to cook for us. There are monthly deductions made on our wages for food and accommodation. Deductions range from R39 to R59 maximum. Toilets are unhygienic and we are not supplied with hot water at the showers. In short, conditions are really bad.

SALB: Do you ever discuss this with workers?

SARHWU members: We do, in fact our discussion on living conditions has made us successful in recruiting new members for the union, and this was as a result of the hostel committee which was formed by union members to struggle for better living conditions.

SALB: How was the committee elected, how is it struggling for better living conditions?

- sarhwu -

SARHWU members: On 10 September 1986 unionised workers decided to form a hostel committee. This took place at the union offices. Ten workers were elected as office bearers.

SALB: Didn't the absence of non-union members create problems for the committee? How did they respond to the committee? Do you think ten workers are enough to represent 7,000 workers?

SARHWU members: This section of workers never presented problems. They agreed with us that living conditions were bad and something had to be done. Their response to our general meetings held at the hostel was positive. We have problems with the number of committee members, but workers agreed that it should continue as temporary. This was after the compound manager heard about it. When we first met with him to introduce it, it was presented as a committee that was going to curb crime, gambling and indiscipline in the hostel. The compound manager was never told about bad living conditions and how workers felt about them. The committee was welcomed on this basis, and the compound manager suggested that only 10 workers make up this committee. Workers agreed to this proposal, but what the committee did was different from what the authorities were expecting.

SALB: How was it different?

SARHWU members: Our first activity centred around organizing workers as members of SARHWU. We did at times deal with crime. We felt organizing workers into SARHWU we had to develop understanding amongst them. We had to show them that it is SATS who creates problems which they were confronted with. The main issue we focused on to develop this understanding was the bad quality of food.

On 8 November 1986 a general meeting was called by the committee. The compound manager was also invited to this meeting. Workers grievances about the living conditions were raised; the question of food was also included. The compound manager's response was that he was going to raise those grievances at a top management meeting and feedback would be made on 1 December 1986. After he left the meeting, the committee requested workers to stay. This opportunity was used to explain further about SARHWU and the need to join hands together, union pamphlets were also distributed.

SALB: What were the developments afterwards?

SARHWU members: The compound manager never fulfilled his promise. His attitude to the committee changed. He claimed it was consisting of union instigators. Following that one of the committee members was evicted from the hostel. Workers response to this development was a boycott of food. A demand that monthly deductions be stopped was made. Failure of the compound manager to do this was met with workers anger, the kitchen was looted, and authorities responded by closing it down.

SALB: How did you view the closing down of the kitchen?

SARHWU members: To us it meant the authorities were not prepared to address themselves to our problem. To force them to do so a decision was taken by workers that expired meal tickets should not be handed in for a renewal. This meant the struggle had to continue. And it did. The authorities solution was to send in dogs and police at the hostel to pressurise them to hand in the meal tickets. Only 55 workers responded to the authorities call. On 19 February 1986 the whole committee was called to the Germiston charge office, where they were questioned for one day in connection with the food boycott. After their release a meeting called at the hostel was interfered with by the police who told workers that they were not against SARHWU, every worker who wants to join can do so. Nothing was said about the living conditions in the hostel. As far as the workers are concerned the struggle still continues.

Developments since the interview

On 25 February 1987, the committee met the compound manager and other officials from SATS. The meeting was to discuss the food boycott and bad living conditions in the hostel. Committee members claimed; "before the meeting could address itself to the agenda, SATS officials asked what position did we hold in our respective jobs. They expressed surprise after finding out that all committee members were so called "labourers". They asked how do workers who are regarded as "staff" think about us. We told them in the hostel workers don't regard themselves different from others because they happen to be called differently at work. All are concerned about the material conditions in the hostel." On the question of living conditions, the committee requested the officials to go into the hostel and observe themselves. This took place, but the officials said there was nothing they could do. They were going to report-back to their superiors. Nevertheless they asked the committee if

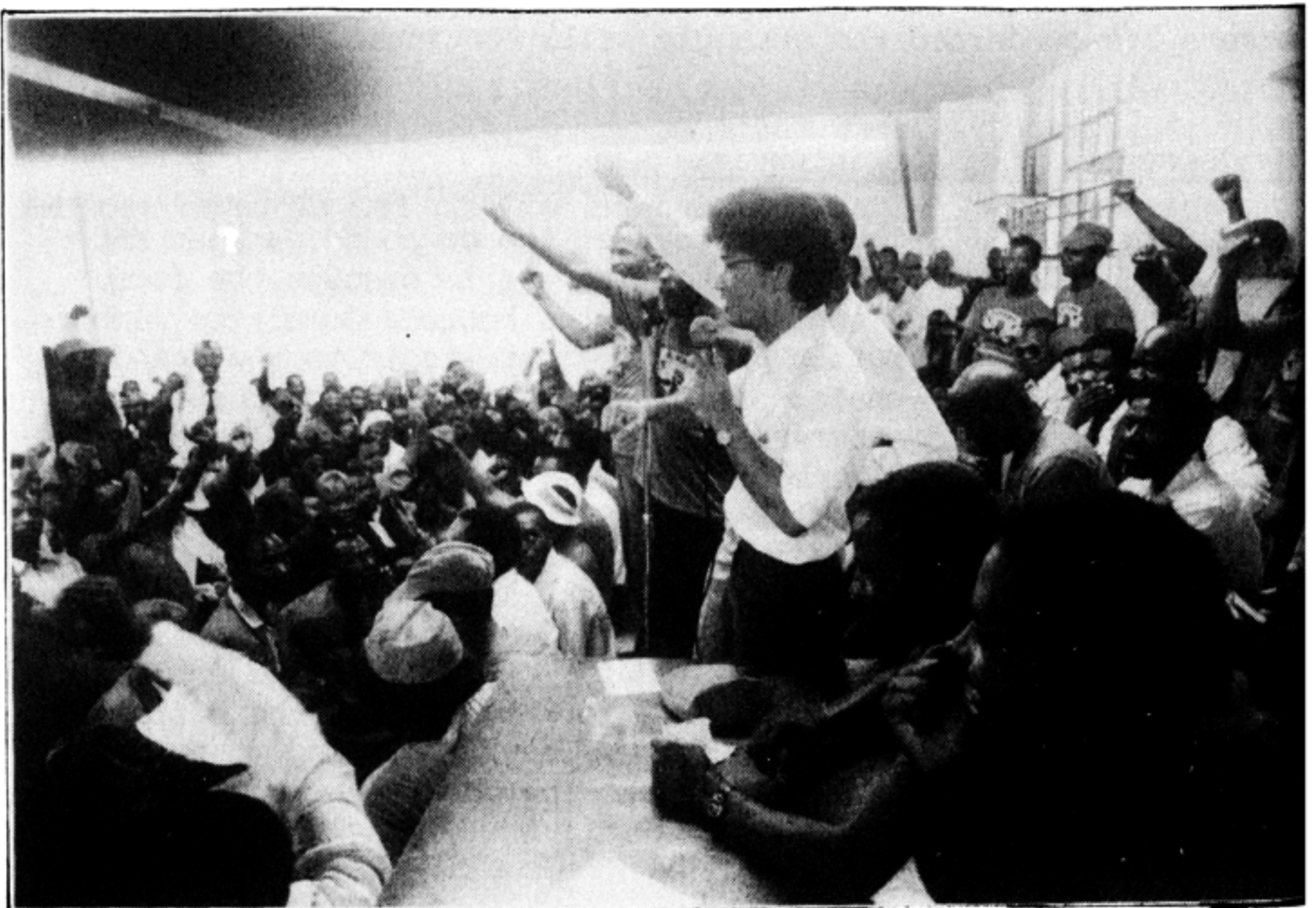
- sarhwu -

it would be accepted by workers to renovate the hostel and re-arrange it in such a way that people stay according to the job they do, that is , drivers should occupy their rooms separately. The committee rejected the proposal. Jeff Majiyezi's negative response is summed up this way; "They want to divide us according to our jobs. If we agree our structures will be weakened, workers will begin to see themselves as different interest groups." The next meeting for a report-back from S.A.T.S. is scheduled for 25 March 1987.

SARHWU rallies its forces

The campaign against bad quality of food and living conditions in the SATS hostels took a new step when SARHWU called a rally at the COSATU hall in Johannesburg on March 8 1987. Workers from Witbank, Pretoria, East Rand, West Rand and Vaal attended. Approximately 1,000 workers were present. "The economy is in our hands. Without us nothing will move", said Justice Langa, the president of SARHWU.

photo: Marcel Golding of NUM addressing SARHWU workers (Afrapix)



"Workers must unite themselves. The system is forcing them to do so. They must realise they are mostly exploited, and as migrants; who are politically oppressed; are locked in the hostels while young and active in SATS activities, and thrown out to the homelands when old and incapable to work. This we must change. We must not only fight at work, our hostels should also be centres of struggle."



photo: railway workers at March 8 rally at COSATU House (Afrapix)

Areas that have already established hostel committees which are presently involved in the food boycott are Delmore, Kaserne, New Canada, Central Rand in Benoni and Lanwen in Krugersdorp. Jeff Majiyezi; a member of the Delmore hostel committee emphasised the need to go back and organise other hostels, "we must go further and unite all committees. If anything happens to any worker in the hostels, we must all take action he said. A resolution was taken that all hostel committees should meet and discuss the present struggle over the food boycott. Whatever decision is taken must be

- sarhwu -

reported to all hostels, and concensus must be reached before action can be taken.

One of the issues that dominated the rally was the migrant labour system. Paul Nkuna, the COSATU Wits regional chairman, said the migrant labour system deprives workers of any future. It breaks up their families. Workers are forced to spend most of their time in hostels. They only visit their homes once a year. He further stressed the need for unity in the railway sector and in COSATU. He said, "It is through unity in struggle that the present system can be crushed." The experiences of mine workers - as migrants - were also related to the rally. A NUM speaker, Marcel Golding, said miners had decided 1987 should be the year to take over the hostels, and not to renovate them, but to destroy them, to destroy the compound system.

The SATS Staff Association was also at the centre of discussion. Workers asserted that these associations were management imposed to control them. A decision was therefore taken that 15 March 1987 be a deadline for SATS to stop deducting 50c for their membership fee to the Black Staff Association. May Day and June 16 were declared workers holiday, all railway workers are supposed to observe these days despite SATS non-recognition. Workers also resolved to take industrial action if the state continues detain- ing leadership in SARHWU.

Wages were also a matter of concern. A worker related the follow- ing experience; "You can work for 20 years, but still you will earn as little as R480 per month." A resolution was taken that this issue should be dealt with together with other unions in the COSATU living wage campaign.

(All report on railway struggles by Jabu Matiko, March 1987)