

Lessons of the OK strike

This years living wage campaign got off to a fighting start with Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) major wage victory at OK bazaars. As the power struggle between the union and management stretched out over ten bitter weeks a number of factors have been highlighted. The union has been able to reassert its power at a particularly difficult time. Increased state repression, the detention of shop-stewards, and severe limitations on workers right to picket, or to move aggressively to directly affect OK sales, makes the victory at OK Bazaars of particular significance. Workers have shown their determination to hold out in spite of repression, and despite managements enormous financial backing and their obvious hope that workers would eventually be starved into submission. CCAWUSA says that the union has now been able to break through a tradition of bad wages and poor labour relations at OK. Within the retail sector, OK has a tradition of being the worst employer, they have a higher record of unfair dismissals, backdoor retrenchments in spite of prior agreements with the union on this issue, and victimisation of union members. Breaking this down, according to CCAWUSA, sets an important precedent in terms of the unions dealings with other employers in the retail sector.

The strike is also notable for its broader implications. The outcome of the strike became a focus of attention for both employers in general and other unions. Within the community the strike provided a focus for mass mobilisation and practical involvement at a time when the state had clamped down on other campaigns and there was a general lull in political activity. The strike also brought together a number of unions, with both COSATU and CUSA-AZACTU together with a number of independents coming out in solidarity with the OK workers. CCAWUSA says that this kind of unified and co-ordinated response, the fact that organisations and union groupings have been able to transcend political and organisational differences for the sake of advancing worker struggles, was of crucial importance and should mark a turning point in the struggle. "We think this attitude, an open approach to all expressions of solidarity, was very important - and it has paid dividends. As a direct result of this outlook we were able to pressurize management with the help of numerous unions also connected to the Anglo-American structure". (1)

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For the OK workers the political lessons of the strike have been vital. Battle lines are now clearly being drawn. Managements resistance to the strike, their open collusion with the police at a number of stores, and various insidious strike-breaking tactics employed have once again demonstrated to workers the hypocrisy of their bosses. Many of the retail employers are well known for their anti-apartheid sentiments: "Anglo-American, through South African Breweries, and Premier Milling own many shares in the OK. We are tired of their hypocrisy. They visit the ANC in Lusaka and then come home to crush legal strikes", said one angry shop-steward. (2) According to the union, "bitter experience has spurred workers to a greater understanding of the objectives of the workers struggle. Increasingly workers are beginning to see that their struggle is not against racial discrimination only, but it is also a struggle for socialist democracy. We are struggling against exploitation of the work-force." (3) CCAWUSA has also been able to employ time during the strike on programmes highlighting the struggles of workers in other countries. Video's, slide-tape shows and seminars were held at various centres around the country.

The final settlement saw wage increases jump from an average of around R230 per month to R400 per month as from November this year. OK has agreed to pay R100 across the board increase (the union's original demand was for R160) in installments of R50 in April and November. Management has also given an undertaking to bring the minimum wage at all OK stores to R400 by November. The staff discount, an important issue for many of the workers, has increased from 10% to 12%. The settlement also resulted in reinstatement for 364 of the 510 dismissed workers. The rest are to await the outcome of arbitration which begins on 30 March. Some of the workers have been in detention at the time of settlement. All priviledged leave forfeited as a result of participation in the strike is to be reinstated. OK has also agreed to make available staff loans for workers. All goods repossessed by the company during the strike are to be returned to the workers. The settlement includes workers in the 'homelands' and women on maternity leave.

The South African Labour Bulletin went to speak to CCAWUSA on a number of issues related to the strike. Union organisers, and officials who participated in the discussion put forward their perceptions of the strike.

Managements resistance

The union feels strongly that OK wanted to set a precedent in how to deal with organised labour. Management's resistance to the strike, which took the form of a combination of measures which included state repression, was carefully monitored by other companies. This could be seen in the high profile media coverage of the strike and the outcome of every round of negotiations. We are also aware that definite discussions around the implications of the strike were held throughout the Anglo-American hierarchy. It is clear that management, through their linkages with Anglo and the vast financial backing available to them were willing to hold out until workers could be starved into submission. There is no doubt that the hire-purchase scheme at OK stores figured in their calculations. OK has an elaborate hire-purchase scheme which generally ties workers to the company. It is not surprising at all for workers to come home with an empty pay packet, since they also shop at the outlets where they work. Management thus foresaw that workers would begin to bend as they could not meet their financial obligations to the company. Management miscalculated on that score however, despite numerous repossessions, some of which the union was able to challenge in court, workers continued their action.

The company also tried to drain the union through costly legal battles. This strategy worked jointly with state clampdowns on the strikers. Over 1,000 workers were detained during the course of the strike, it cost the union R100,000 in bail money to release some of these workers. Although publicly OK would not admit this they obviously felt that the State of Emergency and constraints placed on organised labour would make things more difficult for the union and the workers. This also did not work in spite of tremendous harassment of pickets, dismissals and numerous contraventions of municipal by-laws, etc.

Management also clearly thought that mass dismissals at some stores would frighten the other workers. Dismissals were usually carried out under management's unilaterally imposed "rules of conduct" during a strike. These rules of conduct are very stringent and are all-pervasive. They cover all aspects, from making a noise to preventing the normal flow of business. There was a situation where if workers were not trapped by the state, they would be trapped by the code of conduct. All in all the room for manoeuvre, in terms of publicising the strike, in terms of pickets, in terms

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of putting direct pressure on OK sales, was severely constrained. The union was able to pressurise OK management and dismissals failed to make an impact in the face of worker unity and national co-ordination.

The company miscalculated the depth of bitterness amongst the workers. In many ways the OK strike was prefigured by a spontaneous strike on 22 September 1986 at 15 stores in Johannesburg and Garankuwa. In this strike two union shop-stewards were dismissed. Workers warned that they were becoming more angry with OK Bazaars and that the dismissal of 2,000 workers in just two years was viewed with growing concern by the union. This was despite an earlier agreement with CCAWUSA in February 1985 that OK management would seek alternatives, such as short time and a ban on overtime rather than retrenchments. The following two years however saw a process of "back door retrenchments" with workers dismissed for reasons such as petty theft, minor offences, and "political" offences such as not seeking permission to attend union conferences. During the strike management's strike breaking tactics, such as at Vereeniging stores where, the union alleges pepper was sprinkled on the floors to prevent workers congregating in the canteen, or at Sandton where it is alleged that shop-stewards were visited by police at home with personnel files from OK merely deepened workers anger.

Management's resistance to the strike must be seen in the light of these factors. At a superficial level management tried to present their resistance as a response to "unreasonable" demands put forward by the union. They argued that CCAWUSA's wage demands would "wipe out their profits". CCAWUSA sees this response as an attempt to put the blame for economic and political crisis in this country onto the shoulders of the workers. There is a definite crisis in the country, but this is not a profitability crisis neither does its cause lie with the workers. OK's profits over the last few months have been on the increase. Even if profits were not on the increase, workers have no control over decision-making priorities or economic planning in these concerns. If blunders are made, the workers should not be victimised. Workers are still entitled to a living wage.

Solidarity

There is no doubt that solidarity action from the community and from the various union groupings played a major role in pressuris-

ing management. Within COSATU the blacking campaign by sister unions like Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and pressure from shop-stewards at Anglo linked companies was crucial. Support from CUSA-AZACTU unions linked to Anglo was also crucial. Many of the workers within this latter federation, such as at AECI, Unilever, and some of the Coca-Cola factories occupy strategic positions in the Anglo structure. Through them, and with the help of a number of independents we were able to apply effective pressure, management were clearly concerned about the strike spreading. In fact a number of unions (eg. municipal workers) threatened strike action if the dispute was not resolved. Increasingly workers are beginning to understand the linkages under monopoly capitalism, they are becoming aware of how the Anglo-American ownership structure transcends industries.

An Anglo-American shop stewards council meeting was convened by COSATU in which unions were able to discuss and respond to the strike. What we have learnt from this is the need for unity, the need for a co-ordinated response which transcends ideological differences in order to advance our struggle. We have however seen that the kind of response across unions and in various regions remains uneven. A lot of work must still be done in this area, in fact the OK strike has highlighted this need. Community action was also very important, through these groups pamphleteering, funding, and general awareness of the strike was fostered. Most of the work done by them could not have been undertaken by the union under present conditions. CCAWUSA shop-stewards responded to this by forming their own monitoring group which could evaluate the impact of a consumer boycott on OK sales.

Scabs

Because of the nature of the retail industry, the need for high turnover and the importance of keeping stores open every day there is no doubt that management's ability to find easy replacements for the striking workers was of vital importance. In this sense the strike came at a bad time in that there was a lot of casual labour around. School students were on holiday and many of them were employed as scab labour. Management was also able to play on divisions amongst the workers. In this sense the role of the "sweetheart" union NUDAW (National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers Union) was important. Many Coloured and Indian workers belong to NUDAW. CCAWUSA views this union as disruptive. In Cape Town and Durban this union came out openly against the

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strike, also many scabs were employed through NUDAW members. CCAWUSA is engaged in a programme to expose the role of this union. Ironically after the strike 20 NUDAW members who were employed as scab labour came to join CCAWUSA. A branch secretary of this union has also now joined us.

The strike has particularly highlighted the right to picket. Unions need to rally around to challenge this curtailment of our rights. Many of our members now awaiting the outcome of arbitration have been picked up because of this. These workers faced criminal charges, such as trespassing, intimidation and contravention of municipal by-laws because of picketing. OK now wants to dismiss these workers as a result of these criminal proceedings.

Impact on other employers

The whole co-operation between state and capital has been of particular importance insofar as the attitudes of other employers was concerned. The fact that the union has been able to win our wage demand in spite of this has significantly affected our relationship with other employers. The Pick and Pay settlement which followed on the heels of the OK strike (see elsewhere in this edition) is a tremendous achievement for the union. This is one of the best settlements CCAWUSA has seen thus far.

Notes

1. Interview with CCAWUSA, March 1987
2. From Work in Progress February 1987, p 5
3. Interview with CCAWUSA, ibid

(Coletane Markham, March 1987)