

Construction workers bypass union

By DEANNE COLLINS

“A living wage and democratisation of the Industrial Council.” These are the demands of the 7 to 10 000 construction workers who went on strike for three weeks in Cape Town.

According to CAWU members of a number of different unions joined hands in spontaneous strike action. The unions involved are CAWU (COSATU), BCAWU (NACTU), and the more conservative Building Workers Union, SA Masons Society and the SA Woodworkers Union.

Workers are insisting that their unions come together to resolve the issues. They have set up the Building Workers' Council, a joint structure which is supervising and co-ordinating negotiations with the Industrial Council for the Building Industry (Western Province). One artisan and one general worker from each major construction company sit on this council. The council insists that it, rather than the various unions, conduct negotiations with employers.

Workers say the industrial council (IC) is too bureaucratic. They also claim that employers dominate all the structures of the council. They are against union officials

representing workers in the council and want elected worker representatives to be able to participate fully in the workings of the council.

The secretary of the IC, Koos Kitshoff, responds that “the council is already a democratically elected body”. The council is made up of equal numbers of employer and worker representatives. Kitshoff points out that unions elect their own representatives and there is nothing in the constitution of the council to prevent workers from being elected. All structures of the council comprise half employer and half union delegates.

Kitshoff feels that workers need to be taught about how councils work. Rodney Damon of the Building Workers Union agrees. He maintains that “most of the workers have no inkling of how the council works”.

Is the IC democratic?

Trade union seats on the IC are disproportionate to membership. The older craft unions dominate the council. A source in the industrial council says that the racial

composition of the council is highly skewed. Most union representatives are not African. Even if the council operated on strictly democratic lines, CAWU and BCAWU would still be in the minority, because they represent a minority of workers in the sector. CAWU has around 3 000 and BCAWU 2 000 members. The biggest union in the



sector, the Building Workers' Union, has 30 000 members.

As an interim measure, the council has agreed to allow eight additional worker representatives, nominated by the Building Workers' Council, to sit in on negotiations. They do not, however, have speaking rights.

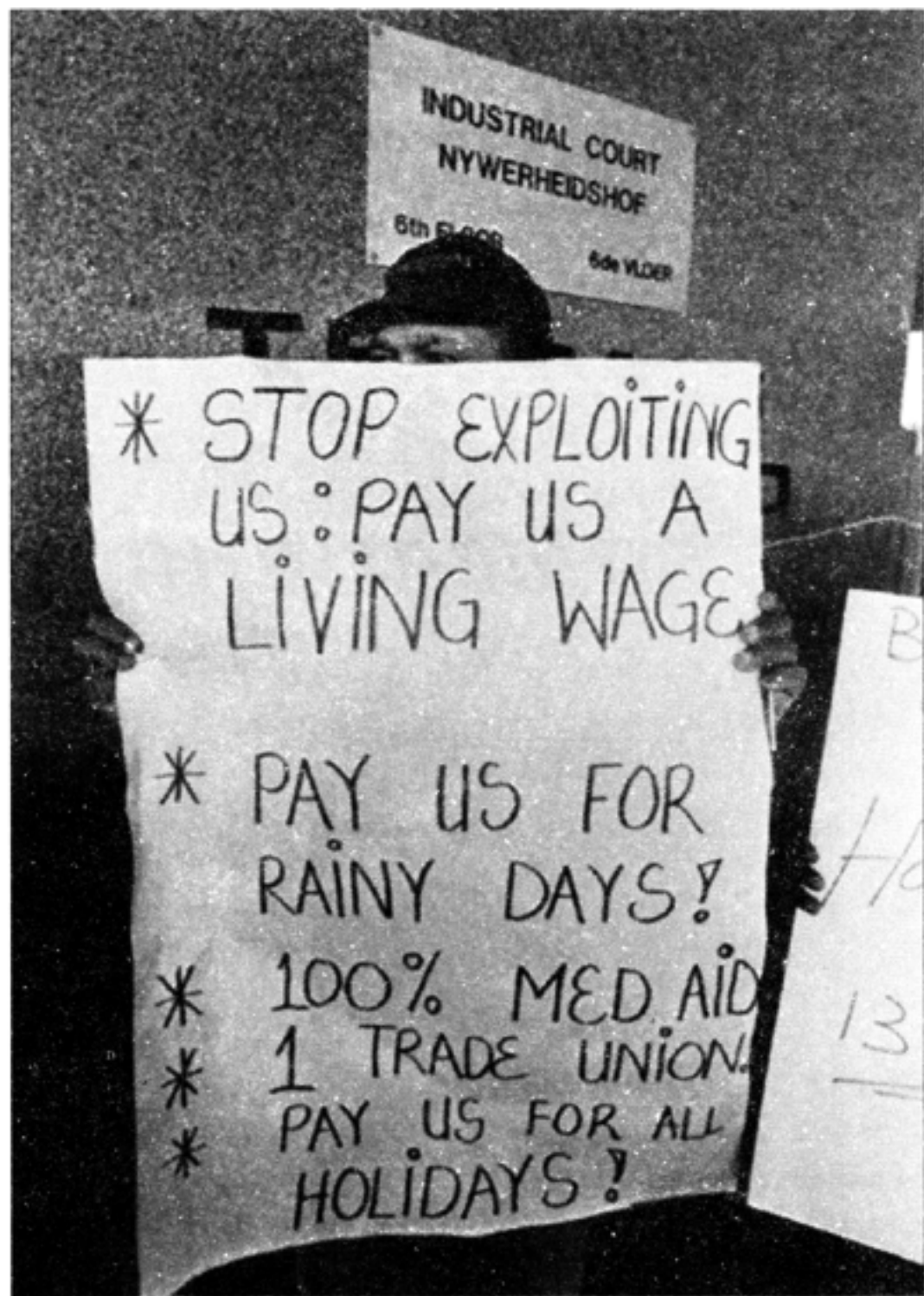
The workers' council has set up its own sub-committees to investigate and make recommendations on a number of issues. One committee is dealing with changes to the industrial council constitution, while others will make recommendations around the pension and sick funds, disciplinary procedures and the stamp system.

Another committee is dealing with wage demands. Workers are demanding that their wages be brought into line with wages in other parts of the country. Currently, artisans in Cape Town earn R11,23 an hour, while general workers get R5,08. Workers are demanding R30 and R22,50 respectively. This represents an increase of over 167% for artisans and 343% for general workers.

The employers' body, the Master Builders Association, is offering 7,5%, which for general workers translates into only 34 cents an hour.

Strike action, which started in mid-July, was suspended on 2 August and negotiations are continuing. Workers have given the council until 10 September to reach a settlement.

CAWU regional secretary Lulamile Mqikela says that the events of the past few weeks have shown that "workers don't want apartheid unions anymore". He is optimistic that a single union for construction workers can be established.



Relations between the different unions have not been that easy, however. Damon of the Building Workers Union claims the majority of its members were "intimidated" into joining the strike. Its artisan members were forced to stop work because they had no labour to work with. He claims artisans do not support the wage demands because "they know these demands will just cause unemployment".

Countering these claims, BCAWU regional organiser, Theo Ntsomi says that some of the unions come to negotiations without a mandate from their members and that they are undermining the authority of the workers' council. The unions are divided and are not presenting a united front in negotiations. He feels that co-operation between the unions still has a long way to go. R