

worker leaders (Thozamile Botha, Phalo Tshume, Mono Badela and Dan Qeqe). For a fuller report on the strike and the events that led up to the bannings, see WIP 11.

But then, in typical fashion, the start of a liquor boycott called by PEBCO demanding the release of PEBCO leaders, and in support of other PEBCO demands, was reported on in the Transvaal newspapers, but then no further news appeared (see RDM, 80.03.04 and Star, 80.03.03).

Thozamile Botha has already heard that his application for a relaxation in the terms of his banning order that, for example, forbid him to enter any factory, has been refused. He and his family are finding themselves in the same position as so many other banned people of having to live off charity and contributions by relatives.

His wife, Fezeka, said that they were selling fruit outside a shop to earn something.

Nightwatchmen (Transvaal): FOSATU, the Legal Resources Centre and the Industrial Aid Society in the Transvaal are said to be taking up the plight of nightwatchmen in the Transvaal in preparation for a Wage Board determination currently probing the conditions of this employment group.

The present minimum wage for this group is said to be R103,00 per month for a maximum of 84 (!) hours per week (even the Wage Board determination for unskilled workers stipulates a 46 hour week for the same minimum wage. (RDM, 80.04.14).

The Minister of Manpower said in Parliament that during 1979 there were 54 strikes



Involving 16 075 workers.
(RDM, 80.02.26)

CONSUMER BOYCOTTS: an evaluation

The Fattis and Monis issue had made black people realise their economic power...I'm sure it is a weapon which will be extensively used in the future.

Mr Hassan Hova, SACOS
President.

THE recent satisfactory conclusion of the Fattis & Monis dispute has given rise to a certain amount of discussion on the effectivity and validity of the use of the consumer boycotts. This article will look at the two most successful boycotts in South African history - the potato boycott of 1959 and the Fattis and Monis boycott of 1979.

Consumer boycotts cannot be regarded as a substitute for effective worker organisation at grass roots level. In the case of the potato boycott there was no unionisation of the workers involved. In the Fattis & Monis (F & M) case the Food and

Canning Workers' Union (FCWU) had been working hard to establish non-racial worker organisation in the Bellville plant.

What is significant is the structurally weak position of the workers involved in both disputes. In the F & M case the majority of workers who went on strike were contract workers who by their action in effect broke their contract of employment. This made them vulnerable to retaliation both from the state and from the management of F & M.

The position of the Bethal potato workers was much weaker. Some were contract workers, some were foreigners living illegally in South Africa, some were miners. The majority were so-called 'volunteers' who had been arrested for pass offences and had been offered a choice between prosecution and farm labour.

The importance of this structural weakness of a section of the working class is that it lacks bargaining power at the point of production. Farm workers have always been the weakest, most exploited section of the labour force in South Africa. The only attempt to unionise them by the ICU during the 20's failed. It seems that if workers are in a structurally weak position at the point of production then they need a certain support outside of the point of production if they are going to achieve an improvement of their position. This article will examine the role which a consumer boycott can play in providing this support and suggest the strengths and

weaknesses of this tactic.

Let us begin with a discussion of the potato boycott. At the ANC conference of May 1959 Robert Resha called for a boycott of potatoes as protest against the treatment of farm labourers in potato farms in Bethal in the Eastern Transvaal.

A series of articles in New Age and Drum magazine as well as several habeas corpus petitions filed in the Transvaal Supreme Court exposed a system of forced labour in the Eastern Transvaal.

From evidence led in court it became clear that in the late 1940's a scheme had been devised between the Native Affairs Department, the Secretary for Justice and the Commissioner of Police. This scheme was never officially gazetted. Petty offenders arrested under the pass laws were given the 'choice' between prosecution and 6-12 months on a white farm. Allegations were made that in fact men arrested in this way very often did not know that they had a choice in the matter. Those that did, often did not know that the maximum fine for these offences was only £1 or £2.

A general circular issued in 1954 (No. 23) explained in greater detail how the system worked:

"The Department of Justice and the South African Police and this department (Bantu Administration and Devt)...held consultations on the problem (of the number of Africans being arrested for technical offences) and have evolved a scheme the object of which is to induce unemployed natives now roaming about the streets in various urban areas to accept employment outside such urban areas."

Instead of facing immediate prosecution the circular stated that

"Natives arrested between 2pm on Sundays and 2pm on Fridays are not charged immediately after arrest, but merely detained by Police."

"Natives so detained are removed under escort to the district labour bureau and handed over to the employment officer....The Natives must be offered such employment as is available in non-prescribed (rural) areas. Priority should be given to farm labour in this connection."

In Johannesburg in 1958, 2337 people were placed in 'employment' on farms. During the first three months of 1959, 1025 men out of 4180 brought to the labour bureau accepted such employment.

This system was part of a wider system of labour allocation which began to be implemented in the 1950's. Its implications for weakening the working class are well-summed up in the following quote:

"Undoubtedly the pass is used by the authorities to control the movements of Africans in the urban areas in order to prevent the stabilisation of any community and in order to harness trade unionists and congress leaders. But the main function of the pass remains the direction of labour. This is borne out by the rash of new regulations recently, creating labour direction offices and by increasing the number of arrests under the pass laws, thus giving the government the power to send men to labour wherever they 'see fit'."

The especially weak position of farm

workers, both contract workers and volunteers, is emphasised here:

"Contracts signed at the bureaux are unique in legal procedure for not only does the African sign it under duress, but he may not break it even if the conditions are fulfilled. On the other hand in terms of the Native Labour Regulation Act, it is an offence for an African to 'neglect to perform any work or refuse to obey any lawful command or use insulting language to his employer', the most he can do is report the farmer to the nearest police station or Native Affairs department official. How much sympathy he would receive from either of these quarters depends on the individual concerned, but where there is so much hatred between black and white and where the farmer is probably on social terms with the official, most Africans would rather not take this course."

These are the structural conditions under which African workers in the Bethal district were selling their labour power. This structural weakness led to abuses within an already highly oppressive and exploitative situation: the system of 'volunteer' labour was only one, and possibly the most extreme form, of the highly exploitative farm labour system which was exposed in the Eastern Transvaal:

"Evidence was led to show that foreign Africans whose documents were alleged to be out of order were not allowed to return to their country of origin, even when they were willing and had the means to do so. Children

under 16, the age at which reference books must be carried, had been arrested and sent to farms, with no attempt made to inform their families. These minors had been forced to enter into contracts to serve with farmers, despite the fact that they were too young to enter unassisted into any contract.

The evidence to support claims of forced labour by the victims of the 'volunteer' scheme is plentiful. Some alleged that: People had been arrested in their homes, and not in the streets; that their relatives had been told untruths or refused information, when enquiring at police stations or labour bureaux.

It was alleged that in many cases arrested men did not know and were not at any time told by the police or employment officers that they had a choice between farm labour and appearance in court.

Once on the farms the treatment of workers worsened. Sworn affidavits and evidence in court told of guarded transport to take arrested africans from labour bureau to farms, of these labourers being locked up at night and at weekends, of their working under guard, of inadequate food and medical attention, inadequate housing and sanitation, and of assaults.

Jackson Mtembu claimed in his affidavit - 'I say that assaults were the most usual things and were committed by the bossboy and the foreman regularly and there was never one day which passed when an assault was not committed on someone. I am sure that many of the labourers still carry the scars of the wounds received as a result of these assaults.'

An example of the difficulty

experienced by these people in organising collectively to improve their conditions can be seen in the following account:

A serious case of ill-treatment of alleged petty offenders was reported in the press during August and September 1958. 32 Africans had been sent from the labour bureau to the farm of CLS Botha in the Heidelberg area, and following alleged thrashings, they decided to leave and report back to the authorities. As they walked along the road a van overtook them, warning shots were fired, and they were rounded up and taken back to the farm where they were cruelly beaten. Botha was later found guilty of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm, and was sentenced to 4 1/2 years imprisonment and 7 strokes with a cane. 2 of his Whites and 7 of his African staff received lesser sentences for participating in the assaults.

These conditions explain why organisation of these workers at the site of production was not possible. They indicate a situation where action beyond the workplace, in the community, becomes necessary.

One response to this situation was to argue that boycott of products was the only response possible to an oppressed people in such a situation.

The ANC and the Congress Alliance both took up the call for a potato boycott and organised its publicity through local branches. They organised demonstrations of men wearing potato sacks and carrying placards with slogans.

The boycott soon attracted widespread support from african consumers in Johannesburg and on the Reef. However, it was a nationwide boycott. One woman who lived in Natal at the time recounted:

One day when I was still a small child I was travelling on a bus when a man carrying a sack of potatoes climbed onto the bus. One of the women on the bus went to him and said: 'How can you buy potatoes? Don't you know potatoes are made with the flesh of our people?' She then took the sack from him and she and the other passengers threw the potatoes out of the windows of the bus.

Despite the fact that potatoes were one of the staple foods of africans in the Transvaal, the boycott became a great success. Another person described how at the Bree Street market the potato halls began filling up, 'and sacks of potatoes remained there going rotten, day after day'.

In 1959 the Potato Control Board bought 18 806 288 lbs of surplus potatoes from the markets of Johannesburg and Pretoria and 154 612 lbs from the producers, at a total cost of £116 044 (in 1958 the Potato Board bought up 100 050 lbs of surplus potatoes for £498). A quotation from the report of the Potato Board further emphasises this point:

"Owing to the accumulation of large quantities of potatoes on the Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town markets the Board, with ministerial approval, inaugurated the following special schemes for the purpose of relieving the market position

a) Stock feed The Board purchased 5 024 737 lb and sold 3 650 550 lb as stock feed...

b) Dehydration A contract was concluded with a dehydration factory for the supply of potatoes."

Not only were potatoes boycotted at the market but African workers refused to buy chips for lunch and ordered fish and bread.

The boycott lasted for about two months. It was successful to the extent that people stopped buying potatoes and the government was forced to react. In late June the Minister suspended the 'volunteer scheme' and established a commission of enquiry. However the government refused to appoint a judicial commission of enquiry into the volunteer scheme. Instead it appointed 2 separate groups. The first was a departmental commission consisting entirely of officials of the Dept of Bantu Administration and Development under Mr B J Smithers, Principal Bantu Affairs Commissioner, Johannesburg.

The other committee was known as the Committee of Inquiry into Farm Labour. Its terms of reference were to investigate all the methods of recruitment of farm labour including the 'volunteer scheme'; to investigate all irregularities and malpractices and to suggest reforms and modifications.

The members of the committee included nominees of the S.A. Agricultural Union, the Chief Bantu Commissioner, a deputy director of Bantu Agriculture and a representative of the police.

Commenting on the Commission of Enquiry the Black Sash said

"It is regrettable that requests for a judicial Commission of Enquiry were not acceded to, for without prejudging the report these gentlemen will make to the Minister, it is difficult to see how a committee made up of officials of the police, the Native Affairs Department and representatives of the farming community (all interested parties in

the scheme) can be completely impartial".

The committee was ordered to report directly to the Minister, and its findings were never published.

At this stage, what comments can one make on the tactic of consumer boycotts? In a capitalist society, a worker is exploited in the production process when he produces not just value for his employer, but also surplus value. However, it is one of the contradictions of capitalist production that while value and surplus value can only be created in the sphere of production, they can only be realised, or converted into profit, once they have been sold (ie in the sphere of circulation). Thus the motive of capitalist production of commodities, namely profit, can only be achieved when the commodity is sold.

The site of exploitation in capitalist society is production. Therefore the main area of struggle against exploitation must be a struggle to change the nature (relations) of production. Obviously a consumer boycott, which operates in the sphere of circulation, cannot be regarded as a means to achieving this end.

Referring to the potato boycott, the following point was made:

"the boycott is a success.... consequently some people are beginning to commit the error of regarding the potato boycott as the main struggle against the Nationalists and it should go on indefinitely. This attitude is understandable but not correct".

This illustrates one of the problems with the mobilisation of the community around one particular issue. Very often its relationship to the wider problems of exploitation and oppression become obscured. To this author, the consumer boycott is a tactic to achieve a particular short-term goal in a particular situation. In the case of both the potato boycott and the Fattis & Monis boycott, this tactic was used to support a particular group of workers in their struggle to obtain better working conditions. If we are to evaluate this tactic we have to consider the specific material conditions in which it was held. It has already been suggested that the workers involved in both disputes were in a structurally weak position and needed the support of the community for this reason.

This raises the question of the types of class alliances into which the working class enters when it accepts support from the community. A basic principle of working class organisation is that the working class should only enter into alliances with other classes when it is in a strong enough position to do so on its own terms.

The reason for this is that alliances made with other classes can lead to the working class being 'sold down the river' should they not make these alliances on their own terms. While one obviously accepts this principle, it is incorrect to believe that community involvement in a working class struggle always means sub-

ordination to the petty bourgeoisie. It can mean this. On the other hand it can also mean the involvement and participation of a wider section of the working class than are actually affected by the particular issue involved.

Furthermore, the petty bourgeoisie are themselves an ambiguous class. At different times they offer their support to each of the major classes (workers and capitalists). In the late 1950s, 'apartheid' discriminated against both the African working class and the African petty bourgeoisie. It was for this reason that they entered into an alliance against oppression and exploitation of 'black' people. By the late 1970s, the position of the petty bourgeoisie became even more contradictory. Both the state and capital are attempting to break the cross class alliance between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie by offering the latter a material interest in supporting the status quo. At present it is too early to judge whether this strategy is succeeding. Either way, this will have important implications for future class alliances.

Since the late 1950s, the working class has itself become stronger and better organised. The Fattis & Monis workers all belonged to the FCWU which articulated their demands clearly and maintained solidarity amongst the workers against management. One of the weaknesses of the potato boycott as a tactic for improving farm workers' conditions was that no clearly laid out set of demands was articulated as a condition for the calling

off of the boycott. The potato workers were in no condition to articulate these demands themselves. The extreme structural weakness of the Bethal potato workers was part of a wider system of exploitation of farm workers in South Africa during the 1950s. This mitigated against their organisation. It also meant that the problem could not be dealt with by a consumer boycott, which is most effective when used for short term ends.

Let us examine in more detail the boycott of Fatti's & Monis. Before the strike in April 1979, the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU) had been involved in trying to obtain recognition at the Fatti's & Monis plant. The workers wanted a minimum wage of R40 per week, regular tea and lunch breaks and 3 weeks annual leave. Management ignored these demands and the FCWU applied for a Conciliation Board to force Fatti's & Monis to negotiate.

The following week 5 of the workers involved were dismissed after they had been previously warned that they would have to choose between the union and their jobs. 5 more workers who demanded reasons for the sacking of their fellow workers were also sacked. The following day, 78 workers in the milling section went on strike in support of those fired, claiming that they had been unfairly dismissed. The reaction of management was firstly to call on the Department of Labour to negotiate with the workers, and to try to frighten them into capitulation. This attempt failed. After that, management dismissed

all the African workers, who it claimed had broken their service contracts by going on strike, and tried to negotiate with the coloured workers. The workers refused to be divided, and the coloured workers refused offers of reinstatement.

Four days after the strike began the Western Cape Traders Association called for the management of Fattis & Monis to 'save an ugly situation' and to settle the dispute as soon as possible. It also threatened to boycott the firm's products if a settlement with all the workers was not reached. Both the WCTA and the Western Cape African Chamber of Commerce attempted to bring the two parties around a table to negotiate a settlement. The attempt failed.

At a mass meeting in May the students of the University of the Western Cape called a boycott of all Fattis & Monis' products. In June, after failing to help negotiate a settlement, the Western Cape African Chamber of Commerce and 2300 members of WCTA joined the boycott. When he joined the boycott Mr Kassim Allie of WCTA said that there was a lot of sympathy for the 88 workers. Mr Mavella of WEPCOC commented:

"A climate must be created for the workers to resume their work - and this is all we are trying to impress on the company - We are also trying to make them realise that it is important for them to treat these workers as people too. We support them not because they are black like us, but because they are people who spend money in our shops and are therefore entitled to

certain consideration too."

Support for the boycott spread and the initial organisers were soon joined by SACOS, students, school pupils, Inkatha and the 'Black Sash'.

The public attitude of Fattis & Monis was that they were not at all worried about the boycott and that they believed that they had considerable consumer sympathy. However, 3 days after shops in African and Coloured townships had stopped buying bread from Fattis & Monis, a representative from management went to see Mandla and asked him to meet with Fattis & Monis to negotiate the reinstatement of the workers. This reaction is no doubt related to reports which appeared in the Rand Daily Mail in June 1979 which described the tenuous financial position of Fattis & Monis even prior to the beginning of the boycott. It read

"Fattis & Monis is one of the smaller food companies and turning its wheat and maize via its mills hardly paid off last year. True, shareholders once again got their 12,5c a share dividend, but the dividend was not only not earned, but share earnings shrank between the first and second half of the year (1978)."

The article went on to say that in the last couple of years Fattis & Monis had been spending heavily on new equipment. The aim of this large capital investment was to maintain a competitive position in the food market. However the program was expensive and the company was in a somewhat difficult debt position.

Referring to the future prospects of

the industry the article said:

"While much remains to be done internally, it would appear that the future profitability of the group depends largely on the pattern of the S.A. Economy."

It would not be stretching the imagination too far to argue that in this situation any decrease in profit would put the company in a very vulnerable position.

A spokesman of Fattis & Monis said that in the period from January to July 1979, profits were R186 000 compared with R363 000 for the same period in 1978. This same gentleman claimed that this decrease in profits had nothing to do with the boycott. However, contrary to this apparent lack of concern Fattis & Monis increased promotions of their products: in Johannesburg they put out a series of products under a new brand name, salesmen were employed to tell people that the boycott was over and free Fattis & Monis T-shirts were given away at Malmesbury.

The financial position of Fattis & Monis at the time of the boycott explains why the company was eager to negotiate on its own terms and avoid recognising the union if possible. This has implications for the success of consumer boycotts as a tactic. It is possible to argue that in a period of monopolisation in manufacturing in South Africa, a small company like Fattis & Monis was very vulnerable to any vicissitudes in the sales of its products. A larger, more diversified company would probably not be as vulnerable and might not have been forced into negotiating. For

example a boycott of Eveready was announced at the same time as the boycott of Fattis & Monis. While it never attracted the public support of the Fattis & Monis boycott, the company was also never forced by the boycott to negotiate. One of the reasons could have been that a multi-national company like Eveready could withstand adverse publicity and a consumer boycott in a portion of its market.

Another reason could have been the nature of the product: bread and potatoes are staple foods of the working class. Eveready products are probably not priority commodities for the working class. For this reason a withdrawal of their purchasing power would not affect the company adversely.

Let us return to the Fattis & Monis boycott. We can accept that for the reasons discussed above, the company was forced to negotiate. However the company wanted to negotiate on its own terms and avoid recognising and accepting an alliance between African and Coloured workers. It is here that the role of the union in maintaining worker solidarity and articulating a set of grievances was crucially important.

The weak position of Fattis & Monis and the cohesive function played by the union represent the positive aspects of the boycott.

A settlement between the union and the management of Fattis & Monis was finally reached. In broad terms the settlement involved the following points:

1. All workers would be reinstated at their old wage rates and at their old jobs as

- soon as possible with no loss of seniority.
2. All the contracts would be renewed within two months.
 3. The union would actively assist in ending the boycott once the contracts had been renewed.

The union had received recognition within the factory and management had accepted that it could not negotiate separately with African or Coloured workers. Mr Moni said

"The boycott could have had a serious effect if we had allowed it to linger on. There is no doubt that these boycotts can be effective. We made the mistake of ignoring organised labour. I would advise other firms to negotiate directly with unions as soon as possible."

From the point of view of the use of consumer boycotts as a tactic, certain problems were revealed after the settlement was reached. Firstly Mr Hassan Howa, President of Sacos said he would not call off the boycott until he was satisfied with the agreement. Representations from the workers persuaded him that they were satisfied with the conditions of the settlement and that he should call off the boycott once the contracts had been received. He agreed to this. The significance of this event is that it represented an attempt to take control of the boycott and the conditions of the settlement - possibly for wider political aims. In this particular case the boycott was being used to achieve a particular short term goal - namely the improvement of working

conditions for Fattis & Monis workers and the recognition by management of the Food & Canning Workers Union. A boycott of this nature cannot be maintained indefinitely because it will lose its effectivity. In this particular case its extension by Sacos could have undermined the settlement reached with Fattis & Monis.

A second problem was revealed by the withdrawal of WCTA from the boycott before the contracts had been renewed. Mr Kassim Allie said

"We have now told our members that they can re-stock and sell the products of the company.

If the company does not implement any of the terms of the agreement we can always re-impose the boycott."

One wonders how easily the association will re-start the boycott once it has called it off. Furthermore the breathing space given to Fattis & Monis may well put it in a strong enough position to withstand another boycott should it decide not to renew the contracts of the workers.

The contradictions involved in a consumer boycott and the alliances with petty bourgeois retailers which this necessitates are revealed here. In a sense the co-operation of a retailing organisation like the WCTA was important in enforcing the boycott of Fattis & Monis product. Yet this group is not bound in any way to continue the boycott after the settlement, although the Food & Canning Workers Union stressed that

"We are confident that Fattis & Monis will speedily obtain the renewal of the contracts, only when this is done will

the dispute be satisfactorily concluded."

The importance of this condition is that it is the contract labour system which puts workers in a structurally weak position vis a vis factory floor organisation. This structural weakness means, as we have argued before, that support from outside the factory floor is necessary for such boycotts to have a chance to be effective. This is the importance of a consumer boycott. However, when its success depends on alliance with a petty bourgeois group, problems such as those discussed above can arise.

