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covering :

THE WAGES COMMISSIONS

How They Started

The Wages Commission represent a new aspect of student involvement in society. Following some thought by students of the University of Natal, the scope of student involvement in the labour sphere was thrashed out at the NUSAS Congress of July 1971. A committee, with representatives from all affiliated centres and branches of NUSAS, concluded that students did have an important role to play in a number of ways.

Broadly, there were two areas in which students could operate. Firstly they felt that by making available to the white public, businessmen, students and housewives, information of the alarmingly depressed situation of the black worker through the dissemination of accurate and carefully researched material, they could act as an effective 'ginger' group.

Secondly, students saw a need to fill the gap of ignorance among black workers of their legal rights, and the channels that could be followed in securing these rights.

The NUSAS Congress accepted these recommendations, and the NUSWEL Secretary -General together with students from every university campus were entrusted with the responsibility of establishing a wages commission at each centre.

By the end of January 1972, Wages Commissions had been established on all five campuses affiliated to the National Union. Each commission encountered the inevitable difficulties that a new organisation faces, but by and large, these difficulties have been overcome, and an increasing degree of sophistication now marks their activities.

Lacking previous experience in this field, students have had to train themselves. They have had to acquaint themselves firstly with the complex legislation that governs labour matters, and also trade union set-up, the position of employers and management, and the attitudes of workers themselves. Secondly they have had to establish very clearly in their own minds their goals and their priorities, in a field in which there is so much to do, and very few to do it.

Gradually a national network of communication has been built up with sympathetic trade unionists, the resource bodies operating in the labour sphere, academics and businessmen.

Through a series of training seminars at the universities, a large number of students have been involved, which should see an expansion and; diversification of the Wages Commissions' activities in the near future.

JUNE, 1973

Activities

The Wages Commissions work basically on two fronts today :

- 1) giving evidence based on academic research, to statutory bodies that determine black wages and working conditions
- 2) distributing information, to the white public and businessmen, and to black workers.

The Wage Board machinery gives the opportunity for at least some kind of industrial activity recognized by the government. The aim of the Wages Commissions has been to use to the full the existing legislation, and especially the provision that allows employees and interested parties to give evidence before the Board. Our strategy here is to build up an accurate overall picture of the industry, and then propose wages based on the Effective Minimum Level. Our information is put before the Board, but it is also communicated to black workers so that their own representations can be more forceful, effective, and informed. Further, the Wages Commissions inform workers, usually by means of pamphlets, that Wage Board sittings are to take place. Were it not for this work, employees would never know that a Government-appointed, impartial Board is investigating their wages. The Board might therefore never hear the opinions of the men who are to receive the wages that the Board sets !

Secondly, the Wages Commissions provide information on a wide variety of labour-subjects to the workers themselves. Power and wealth are the most obvious monopolies in this country. Both lie in the hands of whites, and they re-inforce each other to such an extent that open industrial activity is made impossible. The Wages Commissions can do little to break these monopolies. But they can break the monopoly of information, and are doing so in several ways.

Firstly, two of the Wages Commissions produce a monthly workers newspaper in the appropriate vernacular. They usually have a circulation of from 6 000 to 15 000. These newspapers contain general news of interest to workers, advice on the legal channels that exist, and advice of how to form registered works committees, how to apply for Unemployment Insurance, Workmen's Compensation, etc. Articles are written by both students and workers.

Secondly, periodic fact papers are brought out which deal in more detail with legislation that governs the working lives of employees.

Thirdly, lectures and training courses are organized from time to time, along with experienced trade unionists, to give black works committees the administrative know-how and background to run an effective workers' organization.

We believe that the Wages Commissions have made a significant contribution to breaking the barrier of frustration that workers face, in realizing their plight but being able to do little about it.

The Wages Commissions are also beginning to move into the field of literacy training, in co-operation with NUSWEL local committees.

The Wages Commissions have also assisted other types of worker organisation such as a benefit fund, which provides death benefits to contributors, and an advice bureau, that helps with their complaints and problems.

Achievements

In concrete terms, of course, this question cannot be answered. But it must be recognised that it is not, and never has been, our aim simply to raise black wages on a once-only this -time- you're lucky basis. For we realise only too well that inflation will soon catch up with increases. What is necessary is a new system of bargaining between employers and workers, a system in which workers will wield more real power than they do now. We recognise that workers, and only workers will get and maintain higher wages. Nobody can do it for them. If we have brought these feelings to the attention of the white public, and if we have assisted black groups to organise themselves, then we will have fulfilled our purpose.

There has been another important result of our activities, and that is the emergence of a group of experts, dedicated to reform the labour system, who came up through the Wages Commissions and are now occupied full - time in registered trade unions.

Thirdly the Wages Commissions have contributed in some measure to the new awareness and public debate on labour issues. Through publication of our research, the proposing of reforms, of new ideas and controversial recommendations, new questioning and thinking has developed among some sections of the public and business community.

Policy & Finance

Any discussion on the Wages Commissions must cover the attitude of NUSAS and the Commissions to foreign investment in South Africa. NUSAS Congress adopted policy to the effect that unless foreign firms are prepared to pay their workers decent wages and provide suitable working conditions, they should withdraw. It is bad enough that South Africans should exploit other South Africans, but it is unacceptable that foreigners should do so.

NUSAS does not have policy to support economic boycotts of South Africa.

The activities of the Wages Commissions are financed principally by the Student Representative Councils at the respective universities. Funds for research projects are sought from regional bodies interested in labour matters. Where large scale projects are concerned, NUSAS head-office has funds available which derive from overseas and South African agencies. These funds are received on the condition that they are distributed at the sole discretion of NUSAS.

Many businessmen, particularly those associated with organised business have expressed concern at the activities of the Wages Commissions. Their fear was that the Commissions' motive was not to bring about reform but rather to cause ferment among their workers. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is our belief that low wages cause ferment; and it is our task, firstly to persuade businessmen to prevent unrest by raising wages, and secondly, to facilitate responsible worker organisation. In this way, when there is conflict between employers and the employed, management will be able to negotiate not with a mob, but with a responsible representative of the workers. Increased communication between organised business and the Wages Commissions has led to a greater understanding of each others feelings, and closer consultation is likely in the future.

The Wages Commissions have come under a good deal of uninformed and sometimes completely inaccurate criticism in Parliament and elsewhere of late. The general theme is that the Wages Commissions are responsible for the recent spate of strikes in Natal and elsewhere. This comes despite the realisation by almost every employer, and every trade unionist, that the strikes were a direct result of low wages and poor conditions. It may be assumed that the Wages Commissions provide a useful scapegoat, and further attacks on the Commissions may be expected, the more so since the government has done little or nothing to remove the genuine grievances of the workers.

The Wages Commissions are young, vigorous and exciting organisations. Without exception, they form the most vital arm of NUSAS at this time. They mark the end of the era when students thought it good to espouse academic freedom for the Universities, but that freedom for the rest of the society was not their concern. The Wages Commissions are a manifestation of the belief that a free university cannot function in an unfree society. Students have taken their action off the campuses and out of the protest demonstrations, and into the communities where it is needed most. They are looking not for personal gratification, but for practical results.

ISSUED BY **NUSWEL**

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