

USUTHU !

by David Hemson

It is difficult to begin to comprehend the origin, cost, and likely effects of the series of strikes which paralysed the Durban-Pinetown-Hammarsdale industrial complex in the last few weeks. This is not to say that some of the strikes have not been expected (trade unionists in touch with African workers put out specific warnings before the strikes) but certainly nobody anticipated the popularity and internal dynamism of the strikers.

In all cases where strikes had been anticipated and the management warned by the Textile Workers' Industrial Union the approaches were snubbed. Early warnings were ignored by most firms.

The workers milling about outside the factories, to a large extent leaderless, but with heightened expectations and the weight of numbers, are testament to the lack of recognition of African unionism. The government obviously prefers the chaos of shop floor demands which can range tremendously between a desired wage and a negotiable demand, and which are so difficult to reduce to specific industrial problems, to organised industrial unionism for all workers.

At times the signs of chaos have been overwhelming. Anyone who was in Jacobs in the past few weeks must have felt exhilaration with seeing thousands of workers pouring into the streets on their way home in the early afternoon. At times there has been a happy holiday atmosphere as the workers spurred each other to action crying "Usuthu", the old warcry of the Zulu nations and currently the rallying cry of the popular soccer team, the Zulu Royals.

But behind the rising wage demands lay a clear perception of the needs of their families. Predominant in justification for considerable wage demands was the desire to educate their children, to feed and clothe the family, to pay the rent, and get to and from work. The beginning of the new year brought exhaustion of the holiday pay, needs for uniforms and books, and steep rises in transport costs. The timing of the increase in train fares was guaranteed to bring a response in the boycott.

Throughout the strikes the affirmation of the humanity of the African workers and the humour of the poor were evident. 'We are not children who make a noise for no reason', said one of the textile workers at a mass meeting. 'We are men and women who want to see if tomorrow can be better than today because today is a struggle which is very heavy and we would like to have hope for the future.' 'Everything costs more these days', said another. 'It even costs more to sleep! The blankets I weave I cannot buy in the shops.'

The strikes have been more widespread and determined than at any time previous in South African history. Apart from the strikes at Durban, Pinetown, and Hammarsdale there were also strikes at Pietermaritzburg, Port Shepstone and Umzinto. They centred around fundamental economic goals: higher wages, long service bonuses, better working conditions, and upward mobility for African workers. Altogether 120 firms were affected and more than 60 000 workers have been on strike. At times the waves of strikes have approached a general strike; on one day 32 000 workers were on strike.

The strikes spread not through the use of skilled agitators, but through the force of example. Labour unrest in Durban was built up to a crescendo, from the Durban stevedoring strike to the Coronation brick strike, and then suddenly it swept through the factories.

From the docks which is the traditional centre of labour unrest, worker action spread to the factories which should be comparatively better off. In its sweep the strike movement included Dunlops, which has been developing a model industrial relations system within the present industrial legal context, and Smith and Nephew, which pays considerably higher wages than other textile factories in Natal

Because most of the strikes have centred around Durban commentators have sought answers in the level of wages in Durban. But although Durban has nothing to be proud of it is no worse than other South African towns.

Drawing a line at R10 a week is useful since it distinguishes the percentage of workers in dire poverty, whose families are not likely to survive in the long run and who are most susceptible to socio-economic diseases. It has also been the rallying cry of the South African Congress of Trade Unions; a cry which sparked numerous strikes in the late fifties: '£1 a day!' The following figures show the position throughout the country.

Area	Percentage earning R10 per week or less
Bloemfontein	85
Kimberley	80
Ladysmith	74
East London	62
Pretoria	48
Vanderbijlpark, Vereeniging, Sasolburg	42

Pietermaritzburg	24
Cape Town	20
Durban/Pinetown	20
Witwatersrand (central)	20
West Rand	18
East Rand	11
Port Elizabeth Uitenhage	7

Workers earning less than R10 are excluded from any benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Act and are highly vulnerable to family disaster from the illness of the male earner. From a recent nation-wide survey it has been shown that at least 31,6 per cent of African industrial workers are earning less than R10 per week. But as we can see, the proportion of workers in desperate need is the same for all the three major industrial areas, Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg.

For an explanation of the wage crisis in Durban we must look for other reasons apart from the primary one of low wages. As we have shown Durban fares no better or worse than other major industrial centres. But the difference lies in the fact that African workers in Durban are a homogeneous workforce (virtually all Zulu-speaking) who are undergoing a revolution in consciousness. They are beginning to feel hope for the future, and hope as we know is a revolutionary force. African workers are steadily gaining confidence in their work; many know they are doing skilled and rewarding work, and are becoming aware how job reservation has denied them better work opportunities. The widespread currency of the idea of the poverty line and its publicity showed the African workers that objective standards of minimum

physical requirements exist: at an engineering firm the workers in support of their wage demand waved a pamphlet summarising the opinions of Professor Hilstan Watts.

But undoubtedly the most important factor of all was the relative deprivation of the African worker in the Durban area. The cost of living index has risen there fastest of all urban areas, and these price increases have hit African workers the hardest. Real wages have been virtually stagnant at a time when expectations were rising: the contradiction burst into strike action. One worker told me: 'When we asked for increases our boss gave 55 cent. I would like to give my boss 55 cents and ask him to try to buy his children a piece of meat for 55 cents!' More than any series of strikes before, this series has been concerned with fundamental material issues, and the wage demands were symptomatic of a desire for a complete change in life. 'When I come to work I use the bus even in the rain; but the whites come in their cars. Why should I spend my life kicking the frogs out of my path?' Behind the strikes is the revolt of a people who are economically disadvantaged, insecure in work and accommodation, and who are now becoming aware of new possibilities.

The strikes brought some immediate relief to workers. Generally increases ranging from an immediate R1 to R1,50 were given in the textile industry. The Municipal workers got an increase of R2, at Motor Assemblies an escalating increase of R4,50, and generally wages are being revised by managers fearing strikes in their factories. Whether or not employers are considering the long term implications of paying their workers a living wage is, of course, another matter.



Durban workers on strike (Photo: Natal Witness)

The strikes broke out in a certain pattern. The following characteristics can now be drawn of the typically strike-bound factory:

- **Low wages (generally below R10 for most workers)**
- **Poor labour relations (anti-union, no works committee)**
- **Oppressive management (hiring and firing, high labour turnover, victimisation, informers)**

No company in South Africa has been entirely free of these conditions, but most observers were surprised to see even Dunlops fall, although this may be attributed to job insecurity as sections of the factory move out to the border areas. As the strike movement gained momentum factories without all these characteristics collapsed under pressure. The workers demanded that their fellows in the better paid factories join them in a common demand.

Another feature of the strikes has been that trade unions have generally been absent. Only the Textile and Garment Unions have tried to play an active role in negotiations between striking workers and terrified management. In other cases the role of the unions has been peripheral. The reasons are not far to seek; many unions lack recognition from management, others are not at all interested in African workers, those who are fear rebuke from the Department of Labour for negotiating on behalf of workers who are not members, and finally there is the surveillance of the Security Police.

It has often been said that South Africa has an ideal industrial relations system in the form of the industrial council on which the workers and managers are represented. Although many of the factories experiencing strikes are covered by industrial councils, however, their officials have made few attempts at mediation and generally have sided openly with the management. The industrial councils contain no legitimacy whatsoever for African workers who protest that they are bound by agreements between white and coloured unions and managers.

The only legal organ which can be used by African workers is the works committee. But the committees which existed did not stop the strikes or bring back the strikers. Works committees are tightly controlled by management and in most cases are not permitted to talk about wages. Inevitably wage demands come directly from the shop floor. The works committees can be useful in the investigation and settling of individual complaints, but are quite unable to put forward a general demand for just wages. During a strike the works committees have proved themselves to be quite irrelevant. When the action began the leaders faded away: 'We want the money first, then we will talk about representatives!'

The strikes broke out in a certain pattern. First to fall were the worst firms having the three characteristics I have outlined, but then the strikes spread street by street and area by area. It is well known that African workers travelling to work and in the streets know a lot more about

what is going on than white people who have a limited social network and who don't address strangers. Under these social conditions communication and comparison was extremely easy without requiring roving agitators.

Strikes spread most notably down streets: Gillitts Road in Pinetown, and Chamberlain Road in Jacobs. In Gillitts Road first hit was Consolidated Woolwashing and Processing Mills, the lowest paying factory in the street, then followed Smith and Nephew, Hume Cement Products, Durban Concrete Fencing, again Smith and Nephew, and finally the Huski Group. It is quite probable that since workers use the same transport and live in the same area that they could talk to striking workers and then copy their example.

Later the strikes spread throughout industrial areas, and then to other towns, giving the impression of a general strike.

Central to the strike situation has been the police who have appeared automatically at all disputes. The English language newspapers have been prolific in their praise of the police who did not enforce the numerous laws against striking, but in fact they had little choice. The whole purpose of anti-strike legislation is to get the workers back to work and workers in jail make no profits for the firm. In a 'leaderless' situation the only alternative could be to arrest the whole labour force of 60 000 who had been on strike.

There can be no doubt that the deployment of police even at completely peaceful strikes was done to show the attitude of the state and to enforce settlements in an atmosphere of repression. The use of police in camouflaged uniforms driving in army trucks was designed to reinforce settlement at whatever terms the employers chose to provide.

It is difficult to say whether the strikes have had any real impression on management. The Natal Employers' Association has adopted an anti-worker stance and has moved the employers away from conciliation to a 'take it or leave it' offensive. The Director in a number of meetings of employers has sniped away at the validity of the poverty datum line in an attempt to evade the fact that the African wages are poverty wages. It is not quite certain what was discussed at a number of 'private' meetings held between various employers and employers' associations, but one strong current of thought is opposed to setting the poverty datum line as a target for African wages, and proposes rather wages between R12 – R15 for the male wage earner. The current poverty datum line as estimated by Prof. L. Schlemmer is R19,30 per week.

Some employers have taken advantage of the strike situation, have fired the whole labour force and then taken them on again at lower wage rates. Incredible bitterness is being built up against such employers.

If the employers are not prepared to realise that a new situation has developed and that the time has passed for quibbling about African poverty, the mass strikes of the past weeks will be only a forerunner of further mass discontent. □