

HISTORY OF WAGES COMMISSIONS

FORMATION, AIMS AND STRUCTURE

A Wages Commission (WC) was first formed during early 1971 in Durban. At the 1971 NUSAS July Congress a decision was taken to form Wages Commissions (WC's) on all affiliated campuses, ie at Wits, U.C.T., Natal University (Durban and Pietermaritzburg) and Rhodes. These WC's were to be coordinated through NUSWEL (the social action arm of NUSAS).

The decision to establish Wages/Economic Research Commissions came after students realised the need to:

- " (a) investigate and combat exploitative and discriminatory practices in employment and working conditions on university campuses by government, municipal and provincial bodies and by private industry and foreign investors;
- (b) inform students of these practices;
- (c) launch a student campaign to obtain the ending of such ... practices; and,
- (d) promote equal wages, guaranteed minimum wages and equal economic opportunity for all regardless of race or class". (Resolution taken at April 1971 National Council meeting.)

"The Function of Students", it was argued, was "to redress the (structural) imbalance by using the facilities provided by a university: information gathering, correlation and dissemination and undertaking social action to make people aware of the situation of poverty wages" (in the motivation for the establishment of the Durban WC).

During 1973 the emphasis in WC's shifted towards worker organisation and education, with research only undertaken after an evaluation of its usefulness to workers. This change in emphasis occurred due to a number of factors; including:

- (i) WC's primary concern with a transference of skills and resources in order to move towards a redistribution of effective power and wealth;
- (ii) the limitations and effectiveness of Wage Board representatives in obtaining higher wages (in fact such representations were seen also as providing an avenue for contact with black workers);
- (iii) the realisation that effective changes will only be brought about by a consolidated worker force approaching their employers from a position of knowledge and strength;
- (iv) the understanding that workers are the only people who can accurately and effectively voice their attitudes, grievances and aspirations.

The relationship of WC's to the SRC's was, after debates over autonomy etc., institutionalized with the WC's as sub-committees of the SRC's. This ensured access to SRC resources, particularly finances and printing facilities, although there were cases of SRC interference into publications in Durban and Cape Town. WC's did not participate in 'student politics', as they saw themselves working off-campus primarily.

The internal structure of WC was on two broad levels: a caucus of representatives from sub-groups who outline strategy and seek to coordinate the WC; and a second level of sub-groups which incorporated students to work on specific areas eg. Wage Boards, research, publications. Caucus members were responsible to their sub-group and communicated between groups. This system of levels was intended to allow for decentralization, broadly-based communication and efficient planning and direction.

DURBAN

It began in 1971 by researching working conditions and wage levels of campus workers. This research was extended, so that in 1972 WC's main activity was research into wage levels in particular industries, and the presentation of evidence to Wage Board investigations. It publicised Wage Board meetings and encouraged workers' attendance, in this way having some direct contact with workers.

The WC also participated in nationally co-ordinated research projects, examining the employment conditions of domestic workers; the effects and implications of the Border Industry policy; and the wage levels and working conditions in foreign-owned companies. During 1973 this latter research exposed the appalling conditions on Natal wattle farms owned by British company Cartelles, which aroused international revulsion and received front-page coverage in the British press.

The publication and dissemination of information to workers was also considered vital. From 1972 onwards WC published a news-sheet for African workers called *Isisebenzi* ('The Worker'). This carried news on workers' rights, industrial legislation, Wage Board meetings and strike activity, it also stimulated mobilisation around wage-related issues. Students (outside WC) participated in the distribution of this publication at railway stations and in the docks - building up contact with workers through this.

More analytical articles were published in the *Bulletin* on issues such as the 1971/72 Namibian contract-workers strike; the 1972 dockworkers trike; the killing of 12 Carletonville mineworkers by police in 1973; the Hammarsdale bus boycott; and the grossly low wages paid at Frame's textile mills. The *Bulletin* thus served to expose and examine broader issues affecting workers; it was distributed both on- and off-campus. Meanwhile the experience gained from contact with workers and their needs was shifting WC emphasis towards worker organisation/education.

WORKER EDUCATION AND ORGANISATION

WC assisted in setting up the campus workers organisation (Black Worker Organisation - BWO) in 1972, and acted in an advisory capacity after that.

Individual members of WC worked in the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE), which provided workers with information on their rights (eg. UIF and Workmen's Compensation). The IIE also published booklets for organisers on industrial legislation and methods of organising.

WC liaised with both the IIE and the Institute of Race Relations to form a resource centre (in IIE offices) for workers and labour organisations.

During the 1973 Durban strikes the WC aided workers in the textile industry's wage negotiations. This activity was facilitated by WC research into wage levels and Poverty Datum Lines (PDL). The 'spontaneous' mass action in early 1973 provided the impetus for the formation of the Metal and Allied Worker Union (MAWU); the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW); the Transport and General Workers Union (T & GWU); and the Chemical & Allied Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). These unregistered unions co-ordinated their activities through the Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC), formed in October 1973. Both TUACC and its member-unions built on the structures of the CFWBP, and were committed to non-racial unions, nationally organised according to industrial sectors and based on strong factory floor organisation. WC play a 'facilitating' role in these developments, providing technical skills and resources eg. research and printing facilities. WC members assisted in the TUACC Advice Bureau, formed in 1974. WC as an organisation had no formal links with TUACC, but individual members worked in TUACC.

INTERNAL/CAMPUS ORGANISATION

Internal seminar programmes, informal reading groups and joint seminars with PMB WC (which Durban WC had helped to form in 1972 and with which close contact was

maintained) operated throughout period to educate students in WC. There were occasional publications for campus - but on-campus activity was limited to WC internal education, and to contact with the Black Workers Organisation and progressive academics. This pattern continued until 1976, when WC was forced to consolidate its position on campus. This consolidation was necessary after the 1975 crisis caused by the exposure of the S.R.C. President, Mathee, as a police spy, and by the State-run NUSAS referendum.

CAPE TOWN

The UCT Wages Commission was established in 1972. For the first two years it was predominantly a research body, investigating wages and working conditions in various firms and industries. They published information in order to bring pressure to bear on industries.

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

One of the first research projects undertaken was an investigation into the wages and working conditions of UCT and City Council workers. This was extended to industries and employers in the Western Cape generally. Wage Board determinations were attended and researched for, and workers were informed of issues arising out of negotiations.

Reports were prepared on farm labour, migrant labour and the use of prison labour in S.A.; some of these preliminary investigations prompted further research by academics. National research projects on domestic workers, border areas (the Eastern Cape) and foreign-owned companies were participated in, and U.C.T. investigated operations of German and French capital in South Africa.

From 1974 the focus moved from research to more direct involvement with workers. Political information was printed for workers and worker organizers. The 'worker newspaper' Abasebenzi ('The Workers') began in 1973 and it was written largely by students but included/encouraged workers' contributions. It was published in Xhosa every 4 - 5 weeks, issuing from 8 000 - 1 500 copies. Distribution was undertaken at factories and railway stations and involved non-WC students as well. Articles were aimed specifically at advising workers on how to set up workers' committees and where they could go with their grievances.

The UCT Wages Comm initiated the formation of the Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau in September 1972. The WPWAB was to provide advice to workers on wages, working conditions and on their rights as workers; to assist workers on the formation of factory committees and provide for the establishment of benefit funds for the workers. The Bureau developed education programmes emphasising worker organisation, skills and literacy training. The emphasis was on the policy of encouraging the development of factory committees as a primary basis for worker organisation.

The operations of the advice bureau played a large part in furthering one of WC's aims, which was to promote a federation of workers' committees, at the same time stressing the importance of the factory-home link.

In 1978 the WPWAB officially became the WPGWU.

During 1974 and 1975 WC moved into a supportative vote with respect to the Advice Bureau which was the only functioning trade union in the area at the time.

In 1976 extensive State repression severely curtailed Cape Town WC's off-campus role. The newspaper Abasabenzi was banned for all further editions and there was a lot of police harrassment. Umanyano (Unite) replaced Abasabenzi and focussed on the student uprisings and the Transkei independence. At the end of November 1976 the Wages Comm executive was banned and all further issues of Umanyano were banned. This extensive State repression effectively crushed WC's activities off-campus. At the same time, changing conditions and the growth of the labour movement meant WC had to re-evaluate its role in this regard. The focus turned to on-campus activities.

JOHANNESBURG

The Wits Wages Comm was started in 1978 on Natal lines.

RESEARCH

The WC did a lot of research into foreign firms eg. Dutch and Swedish firms. WC members interviewed workers outside factories about wages and working conditions. This proved to be good for interviews, but bad for the workers, because their hopes were raised, while nothing constructive came out of these interviews. WC also did Wage reports on overseas companies.

WORKERS EDUCATION AND PUBLICATIONS

In 1974 WC with a number of other people and progressive groups formed the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) with the aim of establishing a workers' benefit fund, and to enrol people and form them into groups. The method of doing this was to pamphleteer factories in and around Johannesburg, and to encourage workers to join the IAS. Foreign firms were also pressurised to recognise works committees and to negotiate with the workers. The pamphlets were in Zulu and Sotho. Pamphleteering carried on daily, but stopped in mid-1975. It was seen as a problem that white students were standing outside factories trying to organise black workers into a trade union.

In mid-1975 the IAS took off. It was run largely by white students and intellectuals and more organisers were employed. There were debates within IAS whether a general or an industrial union should be formed and what the role of Wages Comm was in respect to IAS. The intention was always that the IAS should be controlled by workers. The newspaper 'Abasabenzi' was also distributed by IAS.

Apart from the IAS, WC also tried to initiate a literacy and education scheme, but both were unsuccessful. The education was mainly done by Honours students, many of whom were WC members.

CRISIS

By 1976 the effective organisation of WC was stopped. There was a debate within NUSAS as to the role of students off-campus. Also in 1976 members of WC were thrown out of IAS (but not by the workers). This alienated the whole of WC and they withdrew their resources from IAS.

ERC

ERC was formed in 1978, two years after the Johannesburg Wages Comm had been disbanded. As a result of the history of WC, ERC felt reluctant to plunge into worker organisation both on and off-campus. Relations with campus workers were tenuous. Informal contact was made with off-campus organisations to discuss possible problems. There was a continuous dilemma over what projects to do. A debate raged over whether to concentrate on research or to build up ERC as an organisation to educate students on campus.

ERC identified the need to establish student awareness on labour issues, both on campus and within the broad left. A seminar programme was run, along with various articles in Wits Student, covering issues like Wiehahn, exposés of border regions, industrial legislation and labour action.

They felt they did valuable research but lacked short term goals. Their goals were long term spanning a few years and should have been orientated rather to the short term emphasising the needs of students. ERC played a role in broader S.R.C. projects and political organisation on campus. They felt that labour issues should not be seen as the exclusive domain of ERC and ERC should try and ensure that all students are involved in this area.