

THE EAST LONDON STRIKES.

Between the 22nd of July and the 3rd of August, East London was affected by a wave of strikes by black workers. There were strikes at at least 21 firms, involving over 5000 workers in East London and also a strike of 3 500 workers in one firm in neighbouring Kingwilliamstown. We print as an appendix a table giving the information about each firm which we were able to glean from the reports in the East London 'Daily Dispatch'. I shall not attempt to discuss each strike in detail. The overall pattern shows remarkable similarity to the massive wave of strikes in Durban last year. Once the initial impetus has been given by a strike at a large firm, in this case Car Distributor Assemblies, the strikes spread in successive clusters through the various industrial areas. By the 30th, a strike of african bus-drivers threatened to paralyse the city, as most workers have to commute from the 'homeland' town of Mdantsane, about 12 miles from East London itself. But the bus-drivers strike was soon ended, and by the 3rd of August virtually all the East London workers had returned to work.

Most of the strikes were relatively long, compared with the Durban strikes. Some lasted a full week and nearly all the others lasted 3 or 4 days. In most cases there seem to have been fairly lengthy negotiations between worker representatives and management. In some cases the workers representatives were members of pre-existing liaison or works committees, while in other cases they were elected by the strikers. On the whole the strikes were peaceful, although there were two of quite large-scale violence or threats against scabs, and the police intervened with teargas and/or dogs to disperse strikers at three of the largest factories. However, no arrests were made, and no-one was seriously injured either by the police or by the strikers.

Unfortunately the nature of most of the settlements was not made public. In some firms there was adamant refusal on the part of management to make any concessions, whereas in others the workers made gains of the order of 10% or 15%. Several firms used the technique of 'negotiation by sacking'. All the workers were told that they were dismissed, but could re-apply. This technique now seems to be the main way in which South African employers convey their 'final offer' to black workers. The workers are still unable to sustain a strike for much more than one week.

If the overall pattern is familiar, these strikes also illustrate some elements of this pattern in a particularly clear way.

1) Wages and Relative Deprivation.

The overriding demand of the workers, in all but one of the strikes, was for higher wages. East London is a 'border area'; that is, an industrial area on the border of an african 'homeland'. As part of the Government's industrial decentralisation policy, statutory minimum wages are much lower in the border areas than elsewhere. The rationale is that the promise of low wages should offset some of the other cost disadvantages of siting the factory away from

the main industrial and market centres. For example, in terms of the current Unskilled Wage Determination, the minimum wage for a man over 18 years of age is R10 in East London, but R13 in Port Elizabeth, which is not a border area. According to the Productivity and Wages Association's 1971-1972 Wage survey, the average wage for african workers in the lowest grade of work in various towns is as follows:

	average wage	% of africans in lowest grade
Port Elizabeth	R12.31	39.83
Johannesburg	R10.53	30.73
Durban	R10.45	26.63
East London	R 6.57	45.24

These figures are of course now obsolete, but they do illustrate the impact of the border areas policy on wages. And in spite of the lower wages, there is very little difference in the cost of living. The most recent PDL figure for East London, as calculated by the Institute for Planning Research of the University of Port Elizabeth, is R76.73 per month as compared with R78.58 per month for Port Elizabeth, where minimum wages are 33 1/3% higher.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the individual firms shows that the absolute level of wages is not in fact the most important factor. The minimum wages in the firms affected by the strikes varied from under R6 to R18. The minimum wage at Car Distributor Assemblies, where the strikes in effect started, was 42 cents an hour. This gives a take-home pay of approximately R18 per week. At Distillers Corporation, the minimum wage had recently been raised from R13 to R18 per week. In all factories where specific wage demands were made, these demands were, relatively speaking, very large. But the demands vary widely both in absolute terms and as percentages of the current wages. It would appear that virtually all african workers experience their wage levels as being far too low. This is born out by a very interesting discovery made by a research team from the UCT Wages Commission, which interviewed workers and employers in East London in January 1974. They asked the workers they interviewed: "What wage do you think you should be earning". In nearly every case the workers felt that they should be earning approximately double their current wage. This means that the workers earning larger salaries made bigger demands than those earning lower salaries. The Report comments; "There was also an alarming attitude of management at some firms that the PDL was a level to be set as a 'goal' and that once this goal is reached all will be fine. This attitude defeats the very object of a PDL which supposes to set (sic) a theoretical minimum below which it is impossible to live a decent and healthy life". (p4) If this is morally alarming, it is also sociologically naive. African workers are subjected to all the stimuli of a mass-consumption society. It will be a long time before they feel that

they are earning adequate wages.

The impression that there are probably no firms paying wages which satisfy their workers is born out also by one of the peculiarities of the strikes both in East London and in Durban. In 'normal' societies there is very little tendency for strikes to spread rapidly among factories in unrelated industries which just happen to be located near to one another. The fact that this does happen in South Africa would indicate that there is normally a high sense of impotence. But once one strike shows the possibility of action, the example may be very rapidly imitated by all those who see it.

2) Liaison Committees.

Works or liaison committees may sometimes be useful channels for minor grievances, but they do not seem to function satisfactorily when it comes to the question of wages. From the press reports it is not clear how many of the firms had functioning works or liaison committees before the strikes. What is clear is that to the extent that any such committees became involved in negotiations, it was only after the strikes had begun. The Wages Commission Survey comments as follows on the situation it found: "There appears to be considerable confusion amongst employers and employees alike about the differences between works committees and liaison committees. In most cases where committees exist, they appear to be liaison committees appointed by management and usually comprising supervisors and 'bossboys'. Such committees received no support from the workers interviewed. It was only in five cases that works committees were entirely elected by workers. Such committees received far more support from the workers interviewed". (p9) This probably reflects accurately the situation in the strike-affected firms. The committees are either not sufficiently representative of workers to raise the issue of wages, or else do not feel sufficiently powerful to do so unless backed by a strike.

3) Homeland Governments and the Workers.

The growing involvement of homeland political leaders in the problems of workers in the white-controlled industrial areas was further accentuated. Mr. Lennox Sebe, the Chief Minister of the Ciskei, became, as the Daily Dispatch headlined on the 1st of August, the 'peacemaker'. He first became involved when the bus-drivers went on strike on the 30th of July. The general manager of Border Passenger Transport and the inspector from the Department of Labour both failed to persuade them to resume work. Then, on the initiative of the Divisional Commissioner of Police, Brigadier Prinsloo, they were taken to a police station where they met with Mr. Sebe, and he persuaded them to return to work pending negotiations. According to the Dispatch, "Brigadier Prinsloo said after the meeting that Mr. Sebe and his ministers were the only people who could bring the wave of strikes on the Border to an end".

On the following day Mr. Sebe had a meeting at the City Hall with

the mayor of East London, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, 25 industrialists and Brigadier Prinsloo and other senior police officers. It is not known what was discussed at this meeting, but later Mr. Sebe toured a number of the factories where strikes were in progress and met with representatives of the workers. He also took part in further negotiations between the bus-drivers and Border Passenger Transport. At Marine Knitting, african leaders from the Ciskei legislative assembly and from the Mdantsane Town Council also intervened to advise the strikers to return to work.

The precise nature of Mr. Sebe's role in this is not clear. Addressing illegally striking workers at a police station in order to persuade them to return to work, is at least, an ambiguous situation. Whose interests are favoured by a return to work? For the workers it may be that a return to work deprives them of their only bargaining lever. It is usually very difficult to restart a strike once it has been ended. Many of the strikers were aware of this and refused to return for as long as they were able. A worker at one factory explained to a reporter: "We have demanded an increase to 75c an hour, which management have refused to meet. They say they will only tell us how much our increases will be once we are back at work. We are not prepared to return to work until we know what increment we will receive".

However, the role of mediator does offer its own potential leverage, and it may be that Mr. Sebe was able to use the added legitimacy which he gained by being brought in as mediator to extract concessions which the workers would have been unable to achieve unaided. On the information we have from the press, it is difficult to assess this. But Mr. Sebe certainly made some strong statements about employers. He accused the industrialists of hypocrisy, and said that they were furthering labour unrest by taking action against ringleaders whenever there were wage disputes. He also said, "The calling of the police when things are very ugly does not solve the problem at all. In fact the industrialists make the police indirectly the enemy of the law-abiding workers. These situations could be saved if industrialist contact homeland governments immediately".

A further significant intervention was that of the Chief Minister of the neighbouring Transkei, Chief Matanzima. He said, "The time when black people were regarded as docile servants who cannot expect anything, has long since passed". All employers would have to realise they had to contend with the bargaining power of a people who had for decades endured oppression. "The black people have the same cost of living as the whites and therefore will not tolerate any discrimination in wages and salaries between black and white". The intervention of the police in matters between employer and employee was abhorrent when there was no threat of public violence. "The police attitude in applying tear gas and setting their dogs on peaceful strikers aggravates the already degrading relations between black and white".

These remarks illustrate the extent to which both leaders now take for granted the legitimacy of the strike weapon, in spite of its illegality.

Their remarks also illustrate one other important point; the fact that the strikes and the problems which they raise are an integral part of the whole problem of black-white relationships in South Africa. The right to organise and strike is part of the right to be a full citizen. The Wages Commission Report states that amongst the grievances expressed by workers, "There was also a consistent cry to be recognised as people, to be respected and praised for a job well done and not insulted and ignored". (p16) Each strike is also an expression of this fundamental demand.
