

THE PORT ELIZABETH BUSDRIVERS AND THEIR OVERTIME BAN

Workers must always support other workers in times of struggle. This is the most basic principle of workers' unity. Even when, as is the case of the busman's ban on overtime, workers are suffering as well as the boss, the workers must nevertheless show their support for their brother-workers who are fighting for better conditions. Without your support, the busdrivers cannot win! And when the time comes for you to make your demands, you will need their support!

But workers must also never be slow to criticize other workers who have acted foolishly, or incorrectly. There can be no learning if there is no criticism! Thus workers must examine very carefully the overtime ban by the busdrivers.

It is clear that the busmen have followed the example of the dockworkers and busdrivers in Cape Town - both of them won small victories by holding overtime bans. In both cases, wages were increased - but not by very much. In both cases, none of the leaders of the workers were sacked, and in neither case was there any intimidation, because of the great unity among the workers.

On this score, the busdrivers of Port Elizabeth have acted very wisely. By merely refusing to work overtime, they have acted within their legal rights. That is, they have not broken any laws, and thus have given the boss no excuse to fire them, nor the police an excuse to break them up. They have forced the boss to make the next move.

They have also, by their action highlighted an important fault in the system of overtime - if the boss can afford to pay them more for overtime, why can he not afford to pay them the same during normal hours of work? Why is it that decent men must work overtime in order to earn a living? Surely the basic wage (without overtime) should be enough to ensure a decent living for every worker?

In these respects, the workers have done wisely. They have also taken advantage of the fact that the boss cannot replace trained busdrivers easily. In the case of unskilled labourers, for example, the boss might simply sack the lot of them and employ new labourers.

But there are two faults which must be criticized. First, just as it is the duty of every worker to support the busdrivers, so it is the duty of the busdrivers to make sure that they do not act in isolation. By not seeking the assistance of other workers, the busdrivers have endangered their task. By not explaining to other workers the reason for their overtime ban, the busdrivers have risked angering those other workers. And by not undertaking to discuss the affair with other factories, they have acted selfishly, assuming that once they have won a victory in the bus company, all their problems are over! Second, the African drivers made no attempt to get the support of the Coloured busdrivers. Imagine how powerful the busdrivers would be if they all joined together, regardless of race! It is not too late for the busdrivers to explain their actions to their Coloured fellow-drivers.

The lessons from the busdrivers' overtime ban are thus threefold:

1. No demand by the workers can meet with victory unless it has the support of workers in other factories.
2. Workers who are making demands must explain this to other workers, and use the opportunity to educate backward workers about their struggle. In this way, more workers can be drawn into the unity of the workers.
3. Workers in one factory cannot seek their own selfish demands - only when all workers act together in unity can the demands of the workers be won.