

Potchefstroom Municipality Workers Strike

The smashing of the Johannesburg Municipality workers' strike in July 1980 demonstrated the state's attitude towards democratic unions organising in the public sector. The struggle of the Potchefstroom municipality workers to join a union of their choice met similar resistance. 258 Potchefstroom municipality workers were arrested by police, on February 20 this year, for striking. This strike was the climax of a bitter struggle, lasting 2 years, waged by the South African Black Municipality and Allied Workers Union (SABMAWU) for recognition and shop steward representation.

SABMAWU, a breakaway from the Black Municipal Workers Union and a CUSA affiliate, began organising at Potchefstroom Municipality in 1983, obtaining majority membership among the 700 workers employed there. According to Philip Dlamini, the general secretary, the union had to first contend with the management created "liaison committee":

Once we were able to get rid of these dummy structures we had to wage a long struggle to get recognition. But the municipality used delaying tactics and promises but was simultaneously undermining the union.

Victimisation of active shop stewards and harassment of union members by municipality officials was the order of the day in a desperate effort to disorganise SABMAWU and demoralise the workers. As part of this well-orchestrated attack a shop steward was suspended, in August last year, for allegedly "stealing". The case dragged on till January when the shop steward was proved innocent and subsequently reinstated. Repeated requests by SABMAWU for a recognition agreement and negotiations over grievance and disciplinary procedures failed because of the municipality's disagreement over the name of the union and its constitution. Dlamini explains:

They did not like the "Allied" in our name and wanted to know what it meant. The strike clause in our constitution they also wanted removed. We told them that it is the workers who decide the constitution and the name, and not the municipality. They wanted both changed before negotiating.

At a meeting on 9 January 1985, the Municipality again refus-

ed to accept SABMAWU's bona fides. The report back to workers caused immense bitterness. The municipal officials sensed an explosive situation was at hand and circulated a document in an effort to diffuse the tension: "reaffirming its preparation to negotiate." However discussions were postponed twice during January, and when they were resumed, on the 29th, the town clerk, Du Plessis, according to Dlamini wanted to negotiate with the president and the general secretary only, and not with shop stewards. This was rejected by the union. Meanwhile the campaign against active shop stewards continued unabated with disciplinary action against a senior shop-steward for a minor offence. This action by the municipality was the catalyst for action, and workers decided to force the town clerk to speak to them.

On the morning of February 20, approximately 700 workers gathered at the engineering department, peacefully demanding to see Du Plessis. Although he was in the vicinity he refused to make an appearance, and instead a large contingent of police arrived armed with batons, dogs and guns. The police presence was provocative and their arrival turned a peaceful action into violence. Dlamini describes the scene:

The police gave the workers a few seconds to return to work. But before workers could even move some of the shop stewards were identified and arrested. Then chaos broke out. Workers were baton charged and bitten by dogs. Many were badly beaten - young and old - and 258 were arrested and spent a night in jail.

Hastily convened courts were arranged and according to reports some workers were forced to plead guilty (Sowetan 21/2/85) to charges of attending an illegal gathering. Bail was fixed at R200 each and the case postponed. Many of the workers were paid off whilst in jail and faced repatriation to bantustans. One month later 88 of the workers were tried under the Internal Security Act (for convening an illegal gathering). They were each fined R400 or 12 months' imprisonment - with R220 or nine months of each sentence suspended conditionally for five years, which means each worker has to pay R180. (City Press 24.3.85) Despite this setback, support for the union is still strong, but it is going to be an uphill battle to secure recognition.

(SALB Correspondent, March 1985)