

Garment workers rush into action

When the Garment and Allied Workers Union was launched late last year from two former TUCSA unions, people asked whether it could ever become a progressive union. Since then GAWU members have launched successful wage strikes, supported national stayaways and made more advances than any other union in the battle against the new labour laws. GAWU reports.

"1988 is our year! This is the year that garment, millinery and textile workers launch their Living Wage Campaign under the banner of GAWU!"

This was the cry that went out earlier this year shortly after the launch of the Garment and Allied Workers Union (S.A.). But what precisely was the meaning of this call by 102,000 workers in a newly formed union? Was it simply a call for higher wages and better working conditions? Or

did it mean more than this?

To answer this question, we need to go back to the founding congress of GAWU. We also need to focus on developments in GAWU over the past ten months.

The founding congress of GAWU adopted a total of thirteen resolutions. The resolutions cover a broad range of issues which affect workers both on the factory floor and in society at large. These resolutions, linked to our founding principles i.e. worker con-

trol and participation, non-racialism and non-sexism, have guided our work in GAWU over the last ten months. Only by implementing these policies and building confidence amongst the rank and file have we been able to reverse the negative trends that have plagued the industry over the past 60 years.

editions of the *Labour Bulletin* (see Vol 13 No 2 and Vol 13 No 6). We had to build democratic workers' control through shop steward committees and shop steward councils in a union which did not have such structures before. The building of new structures threw up a number of new problems which had to be urgently addressed.



Negotiating team - workers speak out for themselves

Photo: GAWU

With this has come an understanding of precisely what the Living Wage Campaign means in a union and industry which is dominated by a large majority of women workers.

Building new structures throws up new problems

We have already described the restructuring of GAWU in previous

The two main problems were:

- the emergence of hundreds of newly elected shop stewards who lacked the basic skills; and
 - how to implement policy and consolidate the new union in the absence of a broad factory floor leadership of advanced workers.
- By practically implementing policy, especially on education and media, these questions seemed to find

answers to themselves. First and foremost was the need to implement our resolutions on worker education. This meant drafting a shop steward training manual to replace the old training courses. Over the past months hundreds of shops stewards have attended the newly developed GAWU Basic Skills course and other more advanced courses.

The transformation of *Clothes Line*, the weekly union newsletter in the Western Cape, and the Port Elizabeth paper *On the Line*, was also a priority. There was also a need to start a newsletter in Natal. Today each region of GAWU has its own regional edition of *Clothes Line*. The setting up of a national media unit and regional media structures guided by policy decisions played a major role in building new structures in GAWU.

The importance of these publications during the period of transformation of the union can never be over-emphasised. They provide the new union with a consistent two-way channel of communication. The leadership speaks to members through the pages of *Clothes Line*, and rank-and-file use the newsletters to air their views on relevant issues of the day.

Media and shop steward training have played an important role and will continue to play this role. But here again we find ourselves in an area of organisational work that will require ongoing assessment and consultation with members.

A dynamic organising programme

While media and education have played a crucial complementary role, very little would have been achieved without a dynamic organising programme. Central to organising was the need to adopt an aggressive approach to build the confidence of rank-and-file members. No issue was too small to raise with management. Every issue was a learning experience for the hundreds of newly elected shop stewards.

The setting up of shop steward structures in most factories, and the formation of industrial locals, while hastening the process of transformation of the union, have offered us new challenges.

How were we to consolidate these structures? How were we to make them powerful and effective?

Build the Living Wage Campaign!

The answers to this and other questions came to us when the union as a whole started implementing our resolution on worker demands for a national minimum living wage. The Living Wage Campaign aims at uplifting the living standards of all workers, but at the same time we in GAWU had some very specific questions to address. The history of our union and our industry, as well as the particular problems faced by women

workers, meant that our Living Wage Campaign had some specific tasks:

- building workers' control and democracy, which were new to our union;
- developing a consciousness of non-racialism and non-sexism in an industry dominated by women workers;
- addressing factory floor and broader social problems experienced by women in industry;
- developing the confidence in women to come forward and take up leadership positions in our union; and
- building and strengthening all structures in our national union.

First and foremost, workers had to be given the confidence to break from a 60-year tradition of subservience and reactionary trade unionism. Secondly, workers needed to develop the confidence in their own ability and collective strength to improve conditions. Workers needed to be armed with the means to struggle and to understand that only

through struggle and sacrifice would they be able to change anything.

A turning point - the Rex Trueform strike

The Rex Trueform strike in March this year threw up all these questions and problems, and reflected the broader issues facing the union. Indeed, it was a major turning point.

What started as an initiative by a small group of workers in one department quickly developed into one of the biggest strikes in the Western Cape in recent



Women workers - leading GAWU's Living Wage Campaign

Photo: GAWU

years. Within days almost 3,000 workers at three Rex Trueform plants were out on strike demanding an interim cost of living increase. They stayed out on strike for almost four weeks.

Workers in the entire industry in the Western Cape (55,000) fully sup-

ported the strike. Thousands of rands in relief money poured in from garment and textile workers who could ill afford it. Sporadic strikes, work stoppages and other forms of industrial action occurred every day in different factories. The demands were the same and the cry went up all over the Western Cape: "Support Rex workers! A victory for Rex is a victory for all GAWU members!"

After almost four weeks of strike action this proved to be the case. Employers backed down, and the Cape Clothing Manufacturers Association offered an interim cost of living increase of R14.00 across the board which was accepted by workers. This applied to all workers in the Western Cape, not only the Rex workers. The Rex strike put the Living Wage Cam-

paign at the top of the agenda of all union meetings for months to follow, and it has not been left off the agenda since then.

Likewise, GAWU members in Natal demanded an interim cost of living increase and won an adjustment after a dispute was declared. Workers in Port Elizabeth were in the meantime in the heart of wage negotiations and the Living Wage Campaign. After lengthy negotiations and 90% of workers voting 'yes' to strike in ballot, employers backed down and offered wage increases and other compromises to avoid a wide-scale strike. Within one year Port Elizabeth workers have won wage increases of over 30%.

Since these early wage struggles, GAWU has gone from strength to



The message is clear - and the bosses got it!

Photo: GAWU

strength. The confidence gained has pushed rank and file to new levels of militancy.

Garment workers support stayaway

After calls by COSATU for three days of peaceful protest action in June, GAWU members in Natal staged one of the biggest stayaways from work ever witnessed in our industry. Garment factories stood empty as 90% absenteeism figures were recorded on all three days.

June 16 in the Cape was similar to the 6-8 June protest action in Natal, as GAWU members heeded a Shop Steward Council call for June 16 to be commemorated as a day of mourning and sacrifice. Approximately 40,000 workers stayed away.

Garment workers lead the struggle against the new Labour Bill

August and September saw thousands of GAWU members engaged in action against the new Labour Relations Amendment Act.

Action by workers in both the Cape and Natal has pushed the Employers Associations into negotiations and interim settlements with the union on some of the anti-union provisions of the Labour Act.

In the Cape a meeting of over 400 GAWU shop stewards on Saturday 27 August called for action against

the new Labour Act which was due to come into operation on 1 September. One shop steward said, "Yes, our actions are justified. I am an old man of 65 and have been fighting for my fellow workers for a long time, and if I can live for another 65 years to fight injustices like the Bill, I will do so."

The meeting resolved that shop stewards in all GAWU factories would approach management to demand that the company sign an agreement not to use the Act against the workers. On Monday, the shop stewards called general meetings in the factories to discuss the issue. They then presented the demands to management. As management refused to agree not to use the Act, workers in factory after factory took action.

Workers at some factories downed tools for three days, while others held placard demonstrations and half-day work stoppages on Tuesday. Meanwhile, the union was negotiating with the organisation of the bosses, the Cape Clothing Manufacturers Association, at the Industrial Council. By Wednesday the mass action in the factories had forced the bosses to sign an agreement with GAWU.

Bosses agree not to use the Labour Law

The agreement protects all GAWU members from unfair dismissal and retrenchment. The bosses

agreed that they would not change any of the procedures presently being used in factories. They also agreed to tell all bosses to negotiate fair procedures in factories which do not have proper procedures.

GAWU also told the bosses that there are other sections of the Labour Law which workers oppose. The bosses agreed to respect any agreement reached between NACTU, COSATU and the bosses organisation, SACCOLA. The clothing bosses also agreed that if no agreement is reached between these organisations, they would negotiate directly with GAWU about the rest of the Labour Law.

This is the first industry-wide agreement reached between a union and the bosses on the new law, and it was achieved by workers who have only recently experienced democratic organisation.

In Natal, the Natal Clothing Manufacturers Association (NCMA) has been forced to withdraw a policy statement on granting recognition to minority unions. Employers have also agreed to enter into further negotiation on the other provisions of the law.

The Living Wage Campaign and worker leadership

Since the Rex Trueform strike GAWU has not looked back. Indeed, the Rex strike allowed us to address many of our broader problems in a micro form and allowed us to de-

velop an understanding of the problems that face us. While we cannot claim to have solved all our problems we believe we are well on our way to concretely addressing the problems raised in this article.

More significantly, the Rex strike and subsequent struggles have put these issues firmly on the agenda of rank-and-file leadership.

Already, an understanding has been developed that our living wage campaign is more than just a narrow struggle for higher wages and better working conditions. Hence workers were prepared to take action as in the three day protest in June, the 16 June holiday and the Labour Bill, which in the final analysis are political issues presently being addressed by the progressive movement as a whole.

Critical thinking on broader social, political and economic issues are becoming the order of the day among a young emerging worker leadership. Crisply put, the GAWU Living Wage Campaign is an ongoing battle against all forms of oppression and exploitation.

The issue of building broader worker participation and democracy is never far from the minds of the emerging shop steward leadership. A willingness to succeed is evident in the increased attendance at factory, local and other meetings. It is only through positive action, by building unity in struggle and implementing policy, that we have been able to make the advances that we have made to date. Our on-going Living

Wage Campaign is a real weapon in the hands of workers that will allow us to address some of the other unresolved questions raised in this article.

Women coming to the forefront

Building an understanding of non-racialism and non-sexism, and addressing the real problems of women workers, is an on-going area of union work.

The struggles of the past months have seen women at the forefront, willing to lead and learn. Children are brought along to meetings and seminars and in many cases husbands are playing a supportive role. Some husbands, while not in our industry, have come forward to offer assistance.

Others sit waiting patiently outside meetings, or take responsibility for the home while women are at meetings.

These are positive signs, but obviously there are also problems which will need to be closely moni-

tored. If need be, the union should play a role and intervene in some way to combat negative sexist actions which could arise as a result of women playing an increasingly active role in the union. To do this the union has to play an all embracing role and reach out to members and their next of kin wherever they may be - at home or at work.

Men should not view their wives' active role in unions as a challenge to

their own manhood. Rather it should be viewed as a necessity to overcome the hardships experienced by most working families, men and women.

The implementation of our resolution on workers' education has had its rewards. It has armed shop stewards with the basic skills and assisted in the consolidation of structures. More important it has allowed worker

leadership to actively develop an understanding of our founding principles and resolutions without which there could be no real



Part of the struggle - no longer stuck at home

Photo: GAWU

implementation.

Need for a clear political policy

We have to be clear that our positive gains were only possible given our interpretation that working people are "whole people" affected by problems both in the community and in the factories.

Many of these questions are overtly political ones which affect the entire oppressed and exploited population of our country. As a result the need for our union to develop its own clear independent political policy, will become a matter for discussion and debate within union structures over the coming months. We are confident that our leadership is equipped to deal with this issue which has at time divided the labour movement in South Africa.

Ultimately, of major concern to us is the urgent need to build one union, one industry. To date, our efforts in this regard have not been without problems. This being the case, GAWU remains committed to exploring all avenues which are open to us in our attempts to build a united labour movement. ☆

Wage negotiations

At the time of going to press, both Natal and Cape regions of GAWU were locked in negotiations with employers around the Living Wage Campaign. In the Cape bosses have come in with first offers which are unprecedented in the industry.

The initial offer of Cape bosses is an indication of their respect for GAWU and its ability to do what is necessary to successfully represent the interests of workers in the industry.

In Natal, we have already seen worker action in response to employers initial offers.

In the next issue of the *Labour Bulletin* we hope to focus on the negotiations between GAWU and the Employers Association in more detail. ☆