



THE SARMCOL STRIKE

PACSA FACTSHEET

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BACKGROUND TO THE STRIKE

The B.T.R. Sarmcol factory at which the strike took place is located in Howick, Natal. The factory is a wholly owned subsidiary of B.T.R. Dunlop S.A. Ltd which is 62 % owned by the British Tyre and Rubber Company (U.K.). It was established in the second decade of this century and is the only employer of any significance in the area. It had 975 hourly paid employees and approximately 400 monthly paid staff at the time of the strike (April 1985).

Trade Union activity in Howick dates back to the 1950's when the Howick Rubber Workers' Union was formed. It was constantly harassed with much of its leadership being banned and detained in the early 1960's. Trade Union activity was revived in 1973-1974 when the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) began recruiting. Throughout the 1970's management refused to meet union representatives, and MAWU claims that shop stewards were constantly victimised. (See S.A. Labour Bulletin Vol.10, No. 8. July - Aug 1985).

In the early 1980's the company began a massive retrenchment exercise reducing its hourly paid workforce from almost 2200 to 975. MAWU initiated legal proceedings against the company which resulted in an out of court settlement and forced the company to recognise MAWU.

THE STRIKE

Mid-1983 saw the start of a struggle between MAWU and the company over a recognition document setting out basic worker and trade union rights. Between mid-1983 and May 1985 over twenty meetings were held between the company and the union but to no avail. After trying various ways of getting the company to change its stance MAWU called for what it claims was a legal strike.

Workers at BTR Sarmcol downed tools on 30 April 1985 and demanded that management recognise the final draft agreement. Management refused to do this and dismissed the striking workers within 72 hours. They refused to meet MAWU and started hiring scab labour to fill the vacant jobs.

THE ISSUES

*Wages

Sarmcol management denies that wages were ever an issue in the disagreements that led up to the strike. However it is clear from the statement made by MAWU at the Sarmcol shareholders meeting in 1984 that wages were already a crucial issue at that stage.

Minimum wages paid in June 1985 : R72 per week — R312 per month

Supplemented Living Level for a family of 5,9
in February 1985 calculated by the University
of South Africa's Bureau for Market Research : R461 per month

Wage provision of the European Economic
Community's Code of Conduct : 50% above basic
living level

* Recognition

It was the unsuccessful recognition negotiations that actually precipitated the strike. Negotiations had been going on for two years with management claiming that they were seeking to protect management rights and the union claiming that management were seeking to emasculate MAWU in refusing to accept their draft recognition agreement. MAWU claimed that the document they presented contained clauses which were standard country-wide and in some cases were requirements of law.

* Multinational Companies

The role of multinational companies is very controversial. They are seen by some as unfairly exploiting third world countries to the benefit of the first world by paying wages and operating in conditions that would never be acceptable in their home countries. Furthermore, multinationals operating in South Africa also face the allegation that they are benefitting from apartheid structures.

It is in this context that the actions of BTR Sarmcol come into the lime-light. European multinational involvement in developing countries is governed primarily by the European Economic Community's Code and the Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multi-Nationals and Social Policy. It is worth noting some of their provisions which BTR Sarmcol appear to have ignored:

- That industrial relations should be at least as favourable as those observed by similar employers in the country concerned.

- Minimum wages should exceed by 50% the minimum level needed to satisfy the needs of an employee.

- Companies should allow collective bargaining in accordance with internationally accepted principles.

- Companies should operate according to non-racial principles. (The factory in Howick provided housing subsidies for white employees while blacks were housed in single-sex hostels).



These questions are important because the BTR Sarmcol management at Howick did not act in isolation but as part of an international company whose British management has expressed full support for local management's actions.

THE BOYCOTT AND STAYAWAY

Striking Sarmcol workers engaged in a boycott, with the support of other residents of local black townships, of White-owned shops in Howick following their dismissal. Their purpose was to urge the Howick business community to put pressure on BTR Sarmcol to reinstate its workers. Although this was successful in raising awareness of the issue and making white business-people worried about the future of their businesses, they either would not or could not make Sarmcol reverse their decision.

The dismissed workers then decided to take their struggle beyond the boundaries of Howick. On 6 July 1985 a mass meeting was called at which it was decided to approach the Chamber of Industries to intervene failing which a stayaway would be called for the whole of Pietermaritzburg. This was subsequently held on Thursday 18 July with great success. The consumer boycott of White shops was also extended from Howick to Pietermaritzburg and lasted from 10 August to 26 September.

INDUSTRIAL COURT

BTR Sarmcol rejected MAWU's calls for arbitration in June 1985 and MAWU took them to the Industrial Court in November 1986. It was a controversial case with MAWU objecting to the composition of the court from the outset because of the backgrounds of those hearing the case. When judgment was finally handed down in September 1987 MAWU's claims for reinstatement were dismissed. The union is to take this decision on review.

A CHRISTIAN COMMENT

The Bible teaches us that God is particularly concerned with the poor and the oppressed. The rights of workers to form trade unions have been asserted by the most of the mainline Churches in South Africa as have the rights of workers to receive a living wage.

As Christians we cannot condone the actions of those companies which appear to put profits above the well-being of people and which willingly benefit from the system of apartheid.

' "What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.' - Isaiah 3: 15.

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