

Workers International Press

Monthly paper of the Workers International

September 2000

No 26

50p

S.African workers lead the way!



NGWF mourns its dead, fights fuel price increase and defends its leaders

THE National Garment Workers' Federation of Bangladesh organised a rally of condolence and protest after 12 garment workers, including 10 women (ABOVE), died in a garment factory fire on 27 August.

The fire broke out at Globe Knitting BD Ltd., in Dhaka at about 3.30am. It was caused by a short circuit in a first-floor warehouse. It is reported that doors were shut and that the factory had no emergency exits.

Two days previously, the NGWF had organised a protest march against the rising price of oil and gas.

It started at Muktangan in the centre of Dhaka and finished in front of Paltan, blocking the main streets of the city as it passed. Oil and gas prices were increased by a decision of the government, and the protest was organised by the NGWF to oppose that decision. There was a short meeting with speeches before the procession. Chaired by Mr. Alam Kabir, the gathering was addressed by among others Amirul Haque Amin, Miss Shahida Sarker, Mrs Nurun Nahar, Mrs Parul Begum, Mrs. Arifa and Mrs Ohiduzzaman.

The speakers criticised the government decision, saying it would increase the suffering of garment workers, the whole working class and the general masses. They demanded the withdrawal of the increase.

And on 28 July the Federation demonstrated in protest against frame-up charges against its leaders.

Before the rally there was a meeting where speakers a vested interest group acting on behalf of the garment manufacturers of having filed false cases against the federation's leaders. Their main aim, they claimed, was to stop the garment workers' movement, stop the National Garment Workers' federation and discourage garment workers from joining the federation.

This vested interest has filed 12 cases against the leaders of the NGWF, including the general secretary.

The speakers demanded withdrawal of the frame-ups. They also demanded implementation of the weekly holiday and the Memorandum Of Understanding that was signed by the B.G.M.E.A on 1997.

Dot Gibson

WORKERS at the Volkswagen plant in Uitenhage (near Port Elizabeth), South Africa have launched a struggle which raises matters of fundamental principle for the working class and socialists everywhere.

At stake are workers' basic rights to democracy in their trade unions and to trade unions independent of the state and employers. In defending these rights the Volkswagen workers are exposing the class

collaborationist tripartite agreement between the ANC government, the trade union federation, COSATU and the employers.

The workers struck against the company and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) because both are engaged in a process to smash effective collective bargaining. Both are hell bent on weeding out the worker-leaders who are waging a struggle against the multi-national company and against the union leaders who connive with it

For three years there has been growing discontent among workers at the Volkswagen plant as NUMSA officials agreed, without consultation, to the introduction of flexible working practices, resulting in a reduction in the workforce at the plant. Finally these workers replaced some of the shop stewards they did not trust with others known for their determination to defend wages and conditions.

NUMSA retaliated by obtaining a court interdict to remove 13 of the new stewards. The factory was immediately closed by a strike. After three weeks Volkswagen dismissed the 1,368 workers who remained outside the gates. They have now joined the independent Oil, Chemical, General and Allied Workers' Union (OCGAWU) and have taken their case for reinstatement to arbitration.

The sacked workers with their wives and partners turn up in force at the court. The women have formed a Support Group which, among other things, has organised an occupation of the local Mayor's offices and a demonstration with schoolchildren holding empty plates and spoons.

Union representatives do not know when the arbitration court will announce its decision. They anticipate a long and painful struggle. In the meantime the case has been adjourned until the first week of November when further evidence will be presented. The Volkswagen workers are in need of financial support. Many have debt collectors

knocking on their doors, and are in danger of losing their homes. In addition the cost of transport to the arbitration court (attended by all the dismissed workers and their families) is R20,000 a week. This, together with the high cost of the court reports and other things necessary for the fight is putting a very big strain on the union.

OCGAWU has already recruited over 1,000 of the employees who remain in the plant, but Volkswagen refuses to recognise this independent union, and continues to deduct union dues and hand them over to NUMSA. The general secretary of OCGAWU, Abraham Agulhas, was expelled from the Chemical Workers' Union and COSATU in 1997 because of his opposition to the ANC's pro-capitalist policies.

It was then that he and about 250 of his fellow workers at British Petroleum formed OCGAWU. It now has around 12,000 members.

The decision of the Volkswagen workers to join this union is an important part of the growing unrest among South African workers at the anti-socialist policies and actions of the ANC and COSATU.

Not long after the first ANC government of Nelson Mandela was elected a truck driver was killed when the blockade he and his fellow workers had set up in support of their wage demand, was fired on by the national guard. Soon after that thousands of nurses formed an independent trade union when the government and COSATU opposed their just demands. Dockers have also come into conflict with the Transport and General Workers Union which instructed them to "give the new government a chance", and not to take strike action in support of their wages and conditions demands.

More recently COSATU has been forced to call demonstra-

tions of thousands of workers against privatisation of public and social services. But such demonstrations (like the ones which the British TUC organised in recent decades) are merely "safety valves" giving the impression of opposition whilst behind closed doors the union bosses, government and multi-nationals are already signing agreements for privatisation.

So worried is the ANC about losing its mass base that the veterans met OCGAWU and pledged that all their component organisations now support the reinstatement of the workers. Even the local ANC mayor has publicly announced that he never supported the dismissals. He is coming under pressure because in an area of high unemployment. The Volkswagen dispute has meant a drop of 50 per cent in income from services.

However this "support" is a cover for the ANC's real intention to split the workers and break them away from the independent union. There is talk of a package of R17,000 for any worker who agrees to go back via the ANC elders. This move is a clear attempt to split the workers, since NUMSA has already announced that Volkswagen will only take back 800, the rest could be given money to set up some kind of project, and the company will never reemploy the 13 shop stewards.

So far the South African Communist Party (SACP) has not made any official statement on the Volkswagen struggle. Clearly, like the rest of the "official" leadership of the South African labour movement they are faced with a dilemma. They do not want to lose control of the mass movement, but they are committed to the tripartite agreement and the capitalist market. Therefore they sometimes announce their support for work-

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WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE!

