

LABOUR NEWS

LABOUR COMMITTEE

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Inside

- * What is the MDM?
- * Why the consumer boycott ?

Workers won't buy... the LRA



On September 5 and 6, South Africa experienced one of the biggest stayaways in its history. Over 3 million workers, which is more than the number of voters in the white elections, heeded the call for two days of protest. Production in many centres was brought to a complete standstill.

The protest was part of a sustained campaign against the Labour Relations Act (LRA), and was called for by the Congress Of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) and a number of independent unions. This national

unified action by trade unions represents a vast number of workers in South Africa and signifies new solidarity against the LRA and the conditions of economic and political oppression caused by apartheid.

The two day stay away from work is not the end of mass action that workers are undertaking to scrap the LRA. On 22 September workers country-wide began withdrawing their buying power from white owned shops in the cities, refusing to work for more than 40 hours per week. Through this, black workers who have had no access to legal processes

hope to pressurise the white minority, who wield the political power, into using their power to scrap racist and discriminatory legislation.

Unable to vote in the elections, workers actions showed their rejection of the LRA and the white parliament that passed it. Jay Naidoo, General Secretary of COSATU, said " by our protest actions we want to draw attention to the need for the alternative of a non-racial, democratic parliament which respects worker's rights."

This clearly shows that economic and political issues cannot be separated in South Africa.

COSATU sees itself as an integral and vital part of the anti-apartheid defiance campaign undertaken by the Mass Democratic Movement.

But this protest action is not just a rejection of the LRA- it is a rejection of the political system which passed it. Workers are also demanding that:

- 1) Attacks on members of democratic organisations cease.
- 2) The court lift the state of emergency and allow free political activity.
- 3) All restrictions on activists and organisations be lifted.
- 4) All detainees be released immediately.

What is the MDM?

In the last two months a new phase has crept into South African politics. Restricted organisations and individuals have been conducting business as usual, and defying apartheid laws which restrict their actions. This programme has been called the Defiance Campaign.

COSATU has seen its role in the Defiance Campaign as being integral. COSATU's protest against the Tricameral elections is directly linked to its protest against the Labour Relations Act (LRA). Black workers in South Africa do not have the vote and therefore have no legal means to challenge the LRA.

In a statement by Elijah Barayi, President of COSATU, he maintained that: "We, COSATU, have made it clear that the LRA will never work as long as we are unhappy about it". The LRA campaign will be part of the ongoing defiance movement. This will continue until the demands put forward by the majority of South Africans are met.

Worker defiance against the LRA has taken the form of sit-ins, stayaways, down-

tools and a ban on overtime. However, workers have also decided to participate in defiance beyond the factory-floor. This includes defying segregated beaches, parks, toilets and other public facilities.

These issues are linked together, as COSATU believes that it is not just labour legislation that limits worker's power. Rather, the LRA is just one component of a long history of racism and exclusion which deprives the majority of South Africans of basic rights.

The Defiance Campaign has been spearheaded by the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). The term MDM has no definite origins and the movement was not officially launched but since 1988 the concept has been used spontaneously to describe the growing united front of political anti-apartheid groupings.

The main organisations in the MDM are the United Democratic Front (UDF) and COSATU. Other affiliates include NUSAS, the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO), the Johannesburg Democratic



Action Committee (JODAC) and the Five Freedoms Forum (FFF).

According to Mahomed Valli Moosa, the acting general-secretary of the UDF, the MDM must not be underestimated as a "temporary reaction to the State of Emergency, but should be seen as a long term plan of non-violent action incorporating community and factory organisations which will force the government to transfer power to democratic organisations.

THE LRA MAKES ANY SOLIDARITY ACTION ILLEGAL-THE BLACKING OF PRODUCTS TO AND FROM A STRIKE-HIT WORK-PLACE, BOYCOTTING GOODS, SOLIDARITY STRIKES OR EVEN GO-BLOWS-ALL THESE ARE NOW ILLEGAL! THE LRA IS TRYING TO HIT AT THE ROOT OF THE WORKERS MOVEMENT! \ /



What do the workers wa

COSATU believes that the passing of the LRA is one of the disastrous results of a political system which excludes the majority of South Africans. Workers, the people most affected by the Act, had no say in its formulation. In a non-racial democracy the LRA would never have been passed. The industrial conflict and clashes between workers and police, which seemed to necessitate the Act, would also not have occurred.

In a society where workers are represented in the workplace and in central government, actions like stayaways and consumer boycotts would be unnecessary. Mass resistance and defiance is the result of a situation where the demands of the majority are constantly squashed and ignored, and where leaders are detained and imprisoned.

COSATU has demanded of employer associations, and the government's

The Act that caused all the trouble

The LRA should not be seen as simply a factory floor issue. The effects of the LRA are felt far more widely than just in the workplace.

In the factories and in the mines, the heart of South Africa's economy, worker's rights have been diminished. The LRA hinders worker's right to strike and workers are hamstrung when it comes to demanding a living wage, negotiating maternity rights, sick leave, and canteen facilities.

When these demands are denied the consequences are felt in the community. A woman worker on the factory floor may have to choose between being a mother or a worker. Pregnancy more often than not results in dismissal. Does her job accommodate her pregnancy, is she given paid time off to care for the child during the first few months and can she afford to ensure that the child is adequately cared for while she has to work and finally can she return to the same job after the child is born? COSATU and other trade unions play a central role in



Even women with heavy jobs have full responsibility for children

the struggle to end apartheid and win human rights. This struggle takes the form of the MDM's Defiance Campaign in which the majority of workers participated in a stay away, and are at present engaged in the consumer boycott. As

workers play a central role in the MDM, by crushing unions, the LRA attempts to crush the wider anti-apartheid movement. The LRA not only undermines workers rights in the workplace and in the communities, but also in society at large. The trade

unions have become an important forum for economic as well as political demands. The reason being that the unions, especially COSATU, are the only channels open to the majority of workers to express their grievances.

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Department of Manpower that the LRA be scrapped, and that new legislation be passed which incorporates the demands of workers. At COSATU's recent national congress a resolution was passed calling on all trade unions in South Africa to draw up a Workers Charter, which state the rights of all workers in the workplace. Such a charter should be democratically drawn up after discussion and debate amongst workers at all levels.

COSATU's vision of a

Workers Charter poses a concrete, democratic alternative to the sentiments of the LRA but just passing new labour legislation will not resolve the plight in which South African workers find themselves.

While the tricameral parliament continues to pass racist legislation, democratic organisations in South Africa have a larger collective membership than the number of people who voted for the National

Party in the September elections. As long as it is illegal for these organisations to represent the majority of South Africans, the injustices of apartheid and the transgressions of human rights will continue.

In its pursuit to create the conditions for a truly democratic South Africa, COSATU joins the rest of the mass democratic movement in the following demands:

- the immediate release of political prisoners and detainees.
- the lifting of the state of emergency.
- the lifting of bans and restrictions on organisations and people.
- an end to political trials and executions.
- the withdrawal of the SADF and the SAP from the townships.
- the return of all exiles.

Sherlock Vlok investigates



south african history archive

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REFERENCES
Wits Student Aug 1989
Saspu National Aug 1989
SA Pressclips Aug 1989

MEETING

THURSDAY 5 OCTOBER

COSATU on the consumer boycott

BSS

NUSAS

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Hear all about it !