

Stakes Continue to Rise as Clover Strike Enters 5th Month

By Searatoa Van Driel

The end of March marks the fifth month that Clover workers all across the country have been striking in protest of the conditions of employment that the management of Clover is forcing them to accept. In an interview with the General Secretary of the General Industries Workers of South Africa (GIWUSA – one of the unions representing the striking Clover workers), John Appolis shared with *Karibu!* the recent developments that have been taking place.

One of the recent developments part of the striking workers' protest actions took place on 10 March 2022. The action began with a demonstration at the Clover head office in Roodepoort, Johannesburg. The demonstration was held to protest the arrival of the Israeli (Milco) shareholders of Clover in the country for a visit to head office. Not surprisingly, Clover refused to receive the protestors' memorandum of demands.

In response to this, striking workers and comrades at the demonstration made the decision to go to the at the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) of South Africa, in Sandton and stage an overnight occupation inside the premises to demand the IDC intervene in this dispute.

According to Appolis, during the occupation of about 230 workers and activists, the workers' reps met with Tshokolo Nchocho, the Chief Executive Officer of the IDC. In this meeting, Nchocho made various commitments towards assisting the cause of the striking workers. This includes agreeing to pressure government departments to intervene in support of the workers, taking Clover to court for its labour law violations that continue to happen. Nchocho agreed to meet in two days' time with the workers reps and bring along reps from the Department of Trade and Industries and the Department of Employment and Labour.

Having gotten this agreement from Nchocho, the workers' agreed to end their occupation of the IDC offices, and left the premises the next morning (Friday, 11 March). But at the Saturday, 12 March meeting, the IDC reps backtracked on all the promises they made previously, claiming the agreement had been made under duress and that the workers' demands were unlawful. It became clear to GIWUSA that the commitments by Nchocho were made to get the occupation of the IDC offices to end and that the IDC had no intention of intervening on behalf of the workers.

The last negotiations meeting between Clover management and the striking workers' rep that took place a few ago was also unsuccessful. At this meeting, Clover insisted if any worker wishes to return to work (especially the 763 workers who were retrenched at the end of November for refusing these imposed conditions), then they must accept these very same conditions. One of Clover's imposed austerity measures include a salary reduction of 30% or more.

The Clover management gave the deadline of 17 March, and threatened that if the striking workers don't accept these conditions, then the management will start replacing these workers (what is sometimes called a 'scab') and withdraw their offer of reinstatement.

Despite this ultimatum from Clover, the striking workers have remained resolute in their decision to continue striking and their refusal to sacrifice such a large cut to their livelihood.

With the continuously rising cost of living, this sacrifice has not been an easy one, and the decision taken by the striking workers of Clover is not one that has been taken lightly. The strike is now in its fifth month and the effects of going without a salary since 22 November 2021, are being harshly felt by the striking workers and their families.

“It is having an impact on the strikers,” Appolis told Karibu!. “A number of strikers have gone back to work because of the fact that they... have not been earning an income for close to four months now. Clearly their families now are having a difficult time so some of them have gone back to work.”

But GIWUSA has received reports from various sources that although there are some workers who have been forced to return to work, “these workers are not happy because they are currently experiencing the salary reductions of 30% up to 62% in some instances,” along with other benefits’ cuts. There is clearly widespread dissatisfaction from the workers who are working at the moment and understandably so.

Clover’s imposed salary reductions along with all the other cuts to various worker benefits currently being instituted, will result in a loss of almost 50% of the workers buying power. This means the workers would now only be able to afford to pay for half of what they could previously. Some of the worker benefits being cut by the new regime at Clover include cuts to workers’ provident fund contributions, bonuses and annual leave.

As part of the continued strike, workers and activists have been engaging in ongoing pickets at various Clover premises. Clover has tried to get an interdict to prevent these ongoing pickets from happening, by declaring a dispute at the CCMA on the un-founded grounds that GIWUSA has been “in breach of picketing rules”.

This tactic was the first step in a larger strategy to try and get the pickets suspended completely by the Labour Court. According to labour law, if the CCMA cannot resolve the dispute, then the matter can be urgently referred to the Labour Court to get an urgent court order of suspension.

At the CCMA hearing that took place on Wednesday, 16 March, GIWUSA argued that Clover’s demand to suspend the picket is unlawful and that not even the Labour Court has the power to suspend a picket. “A labour court judge may order the picketing rules to be amended, [a judge] can change certain aspects, yes, but the Labour Court, and even the CCMA do not have the jurisdiction to suspend in total a picket,” Appolis said.

Fortunately, the CCMA Commissioner agreed with GIWUSA’s argument, and made a ruling in favour of the striking workers, stating that the CCMA does indeed lack the power to grant Clover’s unlawful demand. This prevented the possibility of a getting a Labour Court interdict.

Because neither of the parties are willing to budge on their positions, there is currently a deadlock between Clover and GIWUSA. No negotiations have taken place since 2 weeks ago.

To keep morale high among workers, and to continue to raise awareness and support for the strike and consumer boycott, a number of mobilisations are planned for the upcoming weeks. One such mobilisations includes a demonstration on 25 March at the Sandton Convention Centre to demonstrate at the 4th annual South African Investment Conference.

GIWUSA will join a number of other allied organisations, including the Palestine Solidarity Movements (the Palestinian Solidarity Alliance, and Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) SA), who have joined in the consumer boycott of Clover because of the Israeli company, Milco, that now owns Clover.

With the already deteriorating standards of living for the working class of South Africa, this new round of assault on the workers of Clovers has proven to much to bear. The striking workers of Clover continue to refuse to accept Clover's conditions, especially the imposed salary reductions, and are still not prepared to compromise on their demands.

This in itself can be seen to be a small, yet significant victory for the workers of Clover. And it is not the only one.

Clover previously made a decision to close down the factory plants in Lichtenburg and Milnerton (in Cape Town) but has since decided otherwise. The plant in Lichtenburg (Clover's biggest cheese-producing plant), will no longer be shut down. The Milnerton Clover plant will also continue production as before.

Appolis explained that one of the contributing factors for this decision is the fact that CSAAWU, based in the Western Cape, mobilised to prevent Ladysmith Cheese Factory from taking on the production of Clover cheese. This happened after the workers heard that Clover had approached their employer to produce cheese for them, in order to compensate for production losses due to the strike. The CSAAWU workers threatening Ladysmith Cheese Factory with a solidarity strike if they agreed to produce cheese for Clover.

This forced the management to withdraw from the business arrangement with Clover, which in turn forced Clover to reconsider closing the Lichtenburg plant down. This complete U-turn on the part of the Clover management shows that the strike is having an effect and an impact on Clover's bottom line.

"Yes, Clover is in production, is stocking retail shops and supermarkets, but we are also noticing that they are running a number of promotions to entice the consumers and the public to buy their products. This gives us an indication that there is an effect on their profit margins," Appolis concluded.

It is these and similar acts of solidarity from various sections of the working class with the strikers of Clover that continue to give hope and courage to not only the Clover workers, but all workers, and all working people currently fighting against oppression and exploitation.