

City unions join Rowntree boycott

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Staff Reporter

THE two strongest trade unions in Cape Town, together with students at the University of the Western Cape, yesterday expressed support for a boycott of all Wilson Rowntree products at a mass meeting on the campus.

The meeting, attended by more than 600 students, workers and representatives from the Food and Canning Workers Union and the General Workers Union, was held "to bring alive the old tradition of May Day celebrations".

May Day originated in Australia in 1856 when workers organized a day of no work and meetings and entertainment as a demonstration in favour of the 40-hour week.

The gathering resolved to support the struggle for reinstatement of the more than 500 workers dismissed by the company in East London after one of the strikers, Mr Johnson Ndidwa, told them of the circumstances that had led to their dismissal.

Reprimand slip

"The trouble started after three workers were dismissed because they refused to fit belts that had come loose," Mr Ndidwa said.

"The workers refused because they had been warned last year to leave that job to the fitters. They had to sign a reprimand slip agreeing not to fix the machines."

Mr Ndidwa said that the

workers had demanded written authorization to go ahead and repair the belts because they feared dismissal. They had also asked to be paid for doing work which was not their job. All



Mr Johnson Ndidwa

three were machine operators and not fitters, he said.

"After the three had to leave, 49 others downed tools, followed by another 40 workers, demanding the reinstatement of the three. All were dismissed.

"The workers' committee pleaded with the management for two weeks to reinstate the workers. It was fruitless.

"A further 62 workers downed tools. For another week we tried to talk to the management, and then the rest of us stopped working.

"There are more than 500 of us on strike. We are not being paid by the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), to which we belong. But the SAAWU does help us in emergencies. We want the management to reinstate everybody,"

he said.

Speaking on the significance of May Day, the general secretary of the Food and Canning Workers' Union, Mr Jan Theron, said that what had happened to the Wilson Rowntree workers was "part of a most vicious campaign against the organized unions in East London".

He urged students to support the workers and not allow themselves to be divided from them. He condemned the proposed labour legislation facing the unions, saying that its purpose was to separate the unions from involvement in the community.

Freedom Charter

After Mr Theron's short address, about 50 workers from the grounds and cafeteria of the university, filed into the packed cafeteria where the meeting was held.

For two minutes they were given a standing ovation as they seated themselves in chairs arranged against a banner of the Freedom Charter, the democratic document drawn up by South Africans of all races in 1955.

Mr Ndidwa said in an interview after the meeting that SAAWU could not afford to pay the Wilson Rowntree strikers but had started a fund for them.

● At a May Day meeting yesterday, University of Cape Town students reaffirmed an earlier decision to boycott the products.