

Neil Aggett was a medical doctor and a trade unionist. This is an unusual combination. This article will look at some of the reasons why this doctor spent most of his time working as an unpaid trade unionist in the democratic trade union movement, rather than as a medical doctor.

Neil studied medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. This is the hospital where the world's first heart transplant was performed; it is also a hospital serving a large section of Cape Town's coloured and black townships. He then did his housejob at Umtata Hospital for six months, and Thembisa Hospital for the last six months. After that he worked at Baragwanath's casualty department in Soweto.

His experiences and observations in these hospitals showed him that there were differences in the kind of illness found among the rich and the poor. He, like many others, noticed that people's living conditions and environment affected their health directly.

For instance, malnutrition and starvation are only found in children whose parents earn very little money. The children of rich people do not suffer or die from kwashiorkor. Children whose parents are too poor to afford enough good food suffer and die from simple infections, for example measles and pneumonia. People who live in damp, overcrowded houses get T.B. while rich people living in big houses with many rooms do not.

Many people, especially children, get badly burnt from accidents caused by paraffin heaters and open fires used in houses where there is no electricity. People who live in electrified houses with stoves and fridges do not suffer nearly as many accidents. Poor people rarely have water-borne sewerage and running water in their homes. This causes and spreads many, often fatal, diseases like gastro, typhoid and cholera.

Places like Soweto and Langa are very dangerous to live in. They have few police patrolling the streets, many large pieces of open veld scattered through them, no

farms and even the unemployed, organize themselves into powerful, united and democratic organizations of their own will freedom be won. Only then will South Africa be a safe and healthy country for all its people.

In many ways Neil has shown the way. By not shrinking from his conviction of the need to organize for a healthy society, he showed that we cannot separate our dreams of freedom from our daily work; and that only when we all fight for our organizations and unity, can we ever be free.

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