



National Education Health and Allied Workers Union

NEHAWU was launched on 26 June 1987, the result of a merger between the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), General Allied Workers Union (GAWU) and the Health and Allied Workers Union (HAWU). NEHAWU is affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the merger was based on COSATU's principle of one industry, one union. The reason for organising the health and education sectors together is an historical one. In the process of dissolving the general unions, SAAWU and GAWU channelled members into unions already organising in the appropriate areas. Given that no unions in COSATU catered for the health and education sectors, these workers were subsequently unionised into NEHAWU.

Union structures and democratic representation

At present, NEHAWU has branches in the Cape (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Grahamstown and King Williams Town), in Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Natal (Durban and Empangeni) and in the Transvaal (Johannesburg, Pretoria, Witbank and Nelspruit).

The members elect shop stewards from the various areas in the workplace. These shop stewards then come together to form a Shop Stewards' Local. The Local elects a



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Branch Executive. All Branch Executives, except the branch secretary, are workers. This ensures that workers are in the majority in every structure. It promotes worker participation and leadership. Accountability is stressed at all times to prevent the union being steered by individuals in directions that are counter to workers' interests. Union officials must consult membership continually through the established structures.

The National Executive Committee (NEC) is elected by the union's annual national congress. Branches send one delegate per 250 members to the congress. Representation is therefore proportional to the size of the branch. The National Executive Committee consists of the president, vice-president, general secretary, treasurer, national organiser, and four additional members who take on specific tasks.

The Central Executive Committee (CEC) consists of all NEC members plus two members from each branch. The NEC can discuss policy but only the CEC, with representation from each branch, has the power to make changes in policy between the periods of National Congress.

Union membership

NEHAWU organises workers in both the public and the private health and education sector. Members are drawn from hospitals, clinics, old age homes, university workers,

colleges, schools, creches and technikons. Members also include workers in medical aid companies. At the time of the union's launch there were approximately 9 500 paid up members. This has roughly doubled. Unions organising within the public sector do not have access to stop-order facilities. This makes it difficult to collect the membership fee of R2 a month. Workers earning meagre salaries of R250 per month on average, often cannot afford to pay every month. Paid up membership is therefore difficult to assess and varies from month to month.

Members are predominantly from the public sector. The majority (about 70%) of members are drawn from the health rather than the educational sector and of this 70%, about 95% are non-classified workers. The remainder consists of workers such as nurses, clerks and radiographers. In the private sector the majority of members are also non-classified but there is a larger proportion of the other groups.



Domestic workers strike at King Edward Hospital - non-classified workers are poorly paid and vulnerable to victimisation. NEHAWU helps them to fight for better working conditions.

Problems faced by workers

Union recognition and permanent status for non-classified workers (NCWs)

NEHAWU's priority is to negotiate permanent status for NCWs as well as for recognition of unions organising in the public sector.

Non-classified workers are cleaners, cooks, security guards, laundry staff and porters. They are temporary staff, regardless of the length of time worked. In the public sector, NCWs are covered by the Public Service Act. Their job description is not clearly defined. After working for 20 years in one area they may be transferred at whim to another job or hospital at short notice with no reasons given. Many workers are victimised by their superiors in this way. They have no job security and are subject to 24 hours notice, no minimum wage and no significant benefits.

A pension scheme exists for many NCWs; this has been an advantage in court applications where the law recognises that the worker contributing to such a scheme has much to lose by dismissal and therefore should have a right to a fair hearing. Workers still face problems of small payouts and often wait months before receiving money owed. Annual salary increases are at the discretion of their immediate superiors.

A recent strategy has been to divide workers by giving certain workers, such as porters, permanent status without salary increases. The only visible effect of their change in status has been permission to eat at a dining hall where better food is served. For this, R34 a month is deducted from their salaries as opposed to R4 a month taken from the NCWs.

The struggle for permanent status for workers includes demands for a living wage, a total revision of job description and conditions of employment and the extension of benefits such as maternity/paternity leave to all workers.



NEHAWU joined COSATU in demanding a living wage for its members.



Racism in Carltonville - NEHAWU members face racial and class discrimination. The union recognises the need to link up with other organisations in order to broaden unity against apartheid.

Campaign for a living wage

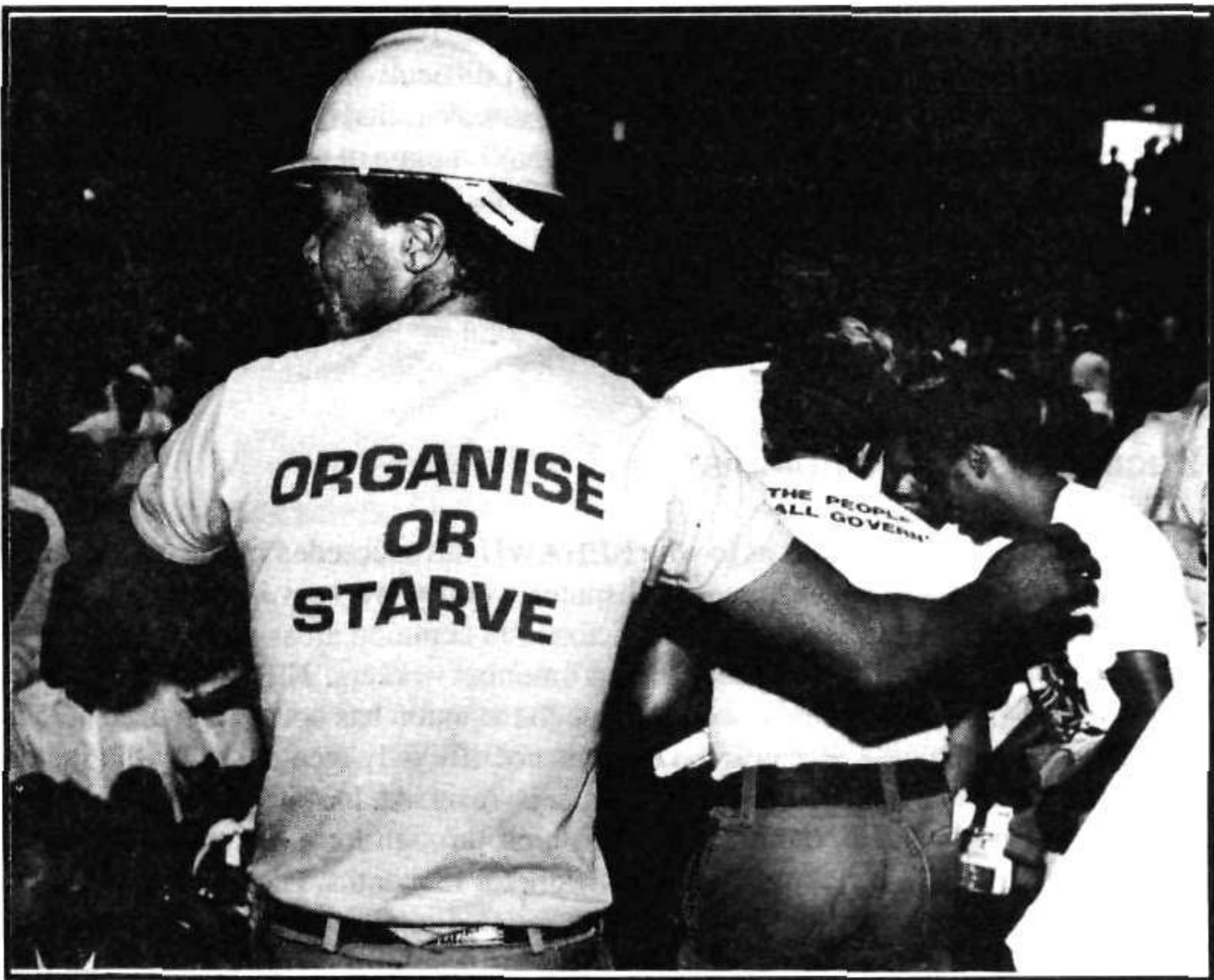
The first major campaign undertaken by NEHAWU was to challenge the government's wage freeze in the public sector. This campaign was linked to COSATU's campaign for a living wage.

Victimisation and unfair dismissals

NEHAWU has been campaigning against victimisation and an end to unfair dismissals in health and educational institutions. Workers must be given fair hearings and the right to be represented by people of their own choice, such as shop stewards or union officials.

Organising in the public vs the private sector

Negotiations in the private sector are often easier than in the public sector. The private sector has structures that are more defined. Also, because one company may own a number of hospitals and clinics, precedents can be set. NEHAWU is presently negotiating national agreements as opposed to agreements with individual hospitals. This would involve negotiating one standard agreement for all groups throughout the country.



NEHAWU has negotiated successfully for many of their members. Health workers are beginning to see that joining NEHAWU can help them to improve their working conditions.

This would mean the union would not have to negotiate “from scratch” each time. Some of the companies have agreed to this in principle but the issue of registration is being used as an obstacle. Management expresses fears that unregistered unions could “disappear” without paying legal costs of lost disputes. They argue that if the union is registered, management will at least have access to contact names and addresses.

The national democratic struggle

NEHAWU recognises that their members are discriminated against not only along class lines but also as victims of apartheid. In the public sector, the government has had a free reign for a long time and conditions of employment have been designed to cater for racial groupings. In many areas, the colour bar is still in operation and superior positions

usually go to whites, regardless of previous experience. Workers often face conservative and racist behaviour from superiors, resulting in difficult working conditions. Even permanent workers face this problem. A recent example is that of the black nursing staff employed at the white Johannesburg Hospital who complain of white colleagues having transport and creche facilities that are denied to black staff.

NEHAWU sees the need to strengthen shop floor structures but also recognises the need to link up with other organisations in the health and education sector as well as community organisations in general, in order to broaden unity against apartheid.

Successes and problems

There are a number of reasons as to why NEHAWU has succeeded in some areas more than others. Members are inspired by disputes won by workers in other industries, particularly other public sector unions. Victories in common areas such as wages and dismissals have helped to conscientise and unionise workers. NEHAWU has won a number of disputes in the public sector although the union has not always been able to consolidate the outcome. Because the union is not officially recognised by the sector, there is no guarantee that victories will not later be reversed. In spite of this, NEHAWU members have remained committed to the union through long periods of hardship. Natalspruit strikers, for example, were out of work for 13 months. The workers met every week for the entire period until the union negotiated total reinstatement to previous positions, with no unfair transfers and backpay for the entire 13 months. At Hillbrow Hospital, Johannesburg, workers got back pay for five months of dismissal and were reinstated without victimisation.

Future plans and visions

NEHAWU is still small and our horizons need to be broadened. Ideally, we would like to exist in every area where there is a hospital or a clinic. We experience problems in terms of both human and material resources. Owing to financial constraints, some of our branches share offices with other unions and may have volunteer organisers rather than paid employees.

Victories have encouraged workers to ask NEHAWU to send organisers to unorganised areas. NEHAWU could embark on joint campaigns with other health worker organisations to assist organisation in these areas. We are looking to expand our membership well beyond NCWs. The question of organising nurses, for example, is high on our agenda.

Ideally, COSATU favours moves towards one public sector union catering for all areas. Public sector unions such as POTWA (Post and Telecommunication Workers Association), SARHWU (South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union), SAAMWU (South African Allied Municipal Workers Union) and NEHAWU are in the process of discussing this issue. The possibility of a mini federation with specialised offices co-ordinating on various levels is also being discussed.

Privatisation in areas such as harbours, post, telecommunications and health is obstructing this process in that it is splitting management and weakening the unions' base.

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