

Struggles for Better Wages and Working Conditions in the Public Sector

Critical Health

The wages and working conditions of a wide range of public sector workers have been deteriorating for a number of years. It is only recently that public sector workers have started to fight back. 1990 was a crucial year. For the first time, public sector workers, including municipal policemen, prison warders, teachers and hospital workers, came out on strike. This contributed substantially to statistics on so-called "man-days" lost as a result of strike activity that year. Many public sector workers, such as teachers, social workers and nurses, have started to confront and overcome an ideology of "professionalism", in order to engage actively in challenging the government on their grievances. This year, various categories of public sector workers have been involved in pickets, demonstrations and strikes. They are, however, up against a government which is clearly not interested in the needs of either public sector workers or the communities they are serving. This article explores some of these issues.

Hospital workers, Nehawu and the HWU

Nearly 25 000 general assistants at state hospitals went on strike during 1990. In March that year, there was a strike by 7 000 workers of the Health Workers' Union (HWU) at seven hospitals in the Western Cape. One of their demands was an increase in the minimum wage from R260 a month to R1 500 a month. In May 1990, more than 12 000 workers organised by the National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (Nehawu) went on strike at 18 hospitals in the Transvaal. They demanded a minimum wage increase from R223,75 to R1 100 a month.

The trade unions achieved an important gain as a direct consequence of these strikes. Both the HWU and Nehawu won the government's respect as unofficial representatives of workers in the health sector. A Nehawu spokesperson said that, despite the Public Sector Act of 1984, which

prohibits recognition of trade unions, Nehawu met with the the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) and reached an interim agreement allowing the union stop order facilities and access to hospitals. Similar gains were made by the HWU in the Western Cape.

Without the repeal of the Public Sector Act, however, this unofficial recognition is only a partial victory. The state may still exercise the powers of this repressive law, if it deems it necessary. In terms of wages, only very small gains were made. The wage for grade one general assistants was raised to R418 a month. This was well below the trade union demands mentioned above. The government, furthermore, continues to exercise almost unilateral control over the pay of all public sector workers.

Government Control over Wage Increases

Wage and salary increases for most categories of public workers occur annually through adjustment in the national budget. Once particular allocations are made in the budget, no further requests for salary increases are considered by the government within that financial year. In this way, the government ensures that, at most, negligible salary increases occur through the collective bargaining process. When faced with the pressure of demands, however, the government often pretends that it respects this process.



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Eleven public sector organisations, including the HWU and Nehawu, formed the Public Service Caucus to negotiate better wages and conditions of service. Earlier this year, the caucus tried to bargain with the government body responsible for public sector staff matters, the Commission for Administration (CFA). The caucus' initial demand was for a 21% increase across the board for all public sector workers. The government, on the grounds that a limited amount of money had been allocated for salaries in the budget, offered 8,5%. The caucus dropped its demand to 15,3%, but the CFA increased its offer by merely 0,3% to 8,8%.

Fragile Unity amongst Public Sector Organisations

Some of the more conservative public staff associations, wooed by the government's excuse about the poor state of the economy, agreed to make a proposal in keeping with the budget allocation. They suggested an initial increase of 7,5%, to occur in July and another 5% in October. Organisations like Nehawu continued to demand 15,3%. This demand is roughly in keeping with the average rate of inflation for all income groups in South Africa, but it is less than the amount needed by low income earners to counteract the effects of Vat and food price increases.

The CFA again increased its offer by a very small amount, namely 0,4%, that is, to 9,2%. Many of the organisations in the caucus accepted this offer, but Nehawu continued to demand 15,3% and went on strike.

Teachers and Sadtu

Another significant development in the last few years has been the increasing degree to which various skilled personnel have been prepared to fight for better salaries and working conditions. In the past, teachers, social workers and nurses have been reluctant to take the necessary action to ensure their rights. They have complied with the pervading ideology that they are professionals and that, as such, it is unethical to demonstrate or withhold labour in order to win demands for better salaries and conditions.

Many teachers have broken with this ideology to establish the non-racial South African Democratic Teachers' Union, which protested in May this year for recognition of their union. The battle among teachers is not over, as there are many who are still members of organisations such as the

National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa, which opposes, on the grounds of professionalism, teachers' involvement in militant struggle over their grievances.

Social Workers Campaign for a Living Wage

Welfare workers have also stepped up their struggle for better salaries. In 1990, representatives of Concerned Social Workers (CSW), the South African Black Social Workers' Association (SABSWA) and the Society for Social Workers (Witwatersrand) met with the South African Council of Social Workers to demand higher salaries. The government failed to respond to their demands for more than a year and, in August 1991, the three organisations decided to initiate a joint campaign for a living wage for social workers. They established a co-ordinating committee for this purpose. After a meeting of the members of the three organisations, the committee was mandated to put forward a demand for a 60% increase. Rina Venter, the Minister of Health and Population Development, refused this demand, arguing that there was a limited amount of money



There have been strikes at TPA hospitals on the same issues over the last few years. The TPA still has no adequate forum for labour arbitration. *Photo: The Star*

available from the cabinet for public sector personnel and that money for salaries was allocated only once a year in the budget.

A 'protest letter' campaign was launched whereby 100 letters were sent to the minister to demand the 60% salary increase. On 12 March 1992, a picket was held in Johannesburg, attended by almost 200 social workers. A letter was given to a department employee by the picketers. No response has yet been received from the government.

Limits to Social Worker Action

Two leading social workers said that social workers would like to take stronger action over their demands. However, this would not include the option of a strike. They said that social workers are not sufficiently unified. Many work for various private agencies subsidised by the government. Another inhibiting factor is social workers' professional ethics. A strike, the two social workers argued, would not be an effective means of expressing welfare workers' grievances, because it is clients who would suffer rather than employers. Social workers also fear victimisation by senior staff members.



"altruism, service...and dedication to the sick" cannot compensate for long hours, poor pay, and subservience. *Photo: The Star*

Nursing and Professionalism

Nursing, according to Laetitia Rispel and Helen Schneider, has its roots in a Victorian concept of professionalism, which entailed "altruism, service, womanly devotion and dedication to the sick under the tutelage of the all-wise physician". During this century, the emphasis has changed to one of higher educational standards. This change was influenced by nurses' struggles against their absolute subservience to the medical profession.

Nursing also became increasingly stratified into a hierarchy with many levels, including chief matrons, matrons, senior sisters, junior sisters, staff and student nurses, and nursing assistants.

The new professionalism was, therefore, also symptomatic of a class ideology, which opposed any challenge by nurses at the lower end of the hierarchy for better working conditions or against their subordinate position.

In the 1940s, white nurses, who then constituted the majority of nurses in South Africa, began to look to trade unionism in order to express their grievances. They were thwarted by the conservative nursing establishment and the government, which set up the South African Nursing Association (Sana), to represent nurses' interests, and the South African Nursing Council (SANC), with disciplinary powers over nurses. All registered and student nurses are compelled by law to be members of Sana. Sana has maintained a rigid ideology of professionalism among nurses, despite increasing class differentiation within the nursing hierarchy.

Nurses and the Unions

In the last few years, black nurses in particular are starting to challenge the ideology of professionalism and the controls imposed by these bodies. According to Nehawu, the strike at hospitals in the Transvaal in 1990 was essentially a strike by general assistants. Since then, Nehawu has made considerable progress in breaking down traditional nursing ethics and attracting nurses to the union. In this way, Nehawu has come close to unifying various sections of the health work force in hospitals.

Nehawu does not deal with nurses' grievances separately, because the union is attempting to sustain and build this new found unity. The union has a shop steward structure, with representatives elected from



Despite a court order being issued against Nehawu, striking workers have maintained solidarity. *Photo: The Star*

particular departments, rather than from a specific job category. These shop stewards meet in a general shop stewards' council of a particular hospital, where the grievances of all workers are taken up.

Nehawu's success in drawing sections of the nursing establishment closer to other health workers is seen in a recent sit-in protest at Sebokeng Hospital. About 800 general assistants decided to stage a two-day sit-in in support of the 15,3% pay demand. The union agreed that nurses should continue to work during the sit-in to ensure that the care of patients was not directly affected. The 800 general assistants were arrested by the police, but the sit-in was sustained by nurses intervening in solidarity with the arrested workers. These workers were subsequently released as a result of the nurses' action

The SANC, Sana and Victimisation

Nurses are, however, open to victimisation for being members of Nehawu or for participating in strikes, because they are legally compelled to be registered with the SANC. A number of nurses did participate in the strike wave of 1990. A year later, the SANC summoned about 200 nurses in Natal and a few in the Transvaal to disciplinary inquiries. People responded by refusing to attend these inquiries, by petitioning disciplinary courts and cramming court proceedings. The SANC yielded under the pressure, although it persisted in victimising individual nurses. It started giving warnings and one day notices to nurses.

The Nursing Amendment Act, passed in the first session of parliament this year, allows nurses to participate in or organise strikes without being held criminally liable. Both Sana and the SANC responded to this change by arguing that strikes remain ethically unacceptable. The SANC said that they will employ section 29 of the new Act to impose fines on striking nurses. Sana said that there should be a fair dispute resolution procedure, including compulsory arbitration, but that it will not condone strike action.

Nehawu Challenges Sana

Since the 1990 strikes, nurses have increasingly approached Nehawu and other trade unions to represent them against the SANC. In various parts of the country, nurses have also approached the regional offices of Sana on their right to freedom of association. Nehawu has campaigned for a number of years against compulsory membership of Sana and demanded freedom of association for nurses. It has, on numerous occasions, invited Sana, the SANC, the Transvaal Provincial Administration, the KwaZulu government and other bodies to publicly debate compulsory membership and the issue of the right to strike in essential services. In May this year, Nehawu and Sana were involved in debating these issues on television. The television programme, according to Nehawu, was the result of its own initiatives.

In response to the increasing pressure mounting against it, Sana recently announced that it intends to hold a referendum on a number of issues. These include Sana's status in law, compulsory membership and Sana's claim to represent nurses' interests. Nehawu opposes the referen-

dum because it is not based on an acceptance of the human right to associate and disassociate freely and because it does not allow for alternatives posed by other structures. It sees the referendum as an attempt by Sana, under pressure, to sustain its control over the nursing establishment.

A Long Road Ahead

Large gains have been made in terms of unionising nurses and challenging Sana. There is, however, still a long way to go. Many nurses are still bound by an ideology which distances them from trade unionism, and the threat of victimisation by the SANC is still a real one. Nchawu's success in winning the support of nurses is, therefore, limited, and this limitation is evident in the current strike by hospital workers. It is clear that, while many nurses and other medical professionals have either joined the strike or have given ancillary support to it, the vast majority of those on strike are general assistants.

Teachers, social workers and nurses are now organised and unionised to a higher degree than ever before, but they have still failed to win meaningful improvements in salaries and working conditions. The government is intent on denying public sector workers these basic rights. This attitude is starkly highlighted by the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA), which has, during the current strike, fired over 5000 hospital workers. Nchawu has responded by intensifying the strike and, at the time of publication, roughly 40 000 workers were on strike at 75 hospitals. The union is up against a government which is also clearly unconcerned about its failure to fulfil its function of providing adequate services to the people of this country.

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