

HWU hospital workers victorious!

The following information, provided by the Health Workers Union (HWU), outlines the recent health workers strike in Cape Town and the significant victories won.

From 3 March 1990 to 20 March 1990, 7 000 health workers organised by the Health Workers Union (HWU) "downed tools" in the Western Cape in support of six main demands. These demands and the agreements reached with the Cape Provincial Administration (CPA) and the Commission For Administration (CFA) on 20 March 1990, are outlined as follows:

● **R1 500 living wage:** Average wages are between R300 and R400 per month, starting at R260.

Agreement: A promise was made to provide an increase over and above the 10% increase given to public sector workers. The exact amount was not finalised. However, workers are not satisfied with the promise of a wage increase without knowing how much it will be. Workers decided to reassess their actions if the wage issue is not satisfactorily addressed on 16 April.

● **6 months paid maternity leave:** 2 months leave granted for confinement. This leave is paid if the employee has paid leave due; if not, it is unpaid. Some workers have had to resign over this period, with no guarantee of getting their jobs back afterwards.

Agreement: A new package of benefits will be announced by the 30 June. Meantime, no worker will have to resign when going on maternity leave and may still draw U.I.F.

● **Permanent status:** The workers are regarded as temporary. This means they can be given 24 hours' notice without explanation. Also, workers must have 2 years of service before they can join the Pension Fund.

Agreement: Workers employed for over 3 months will be regarded as permanent. Workers must be given 1 month's notice of dismissal. Workers will be able to join the Pension Fund immediately.

● **40 hour week:** Workers are working more than 40 hours a week, leaving them little time to spend with their families.

Agreement: A 40 hour week will be in force from 1 May 1990.

● **Recognition of the union (HWU):** According to law, only staff associations may be

recognised.

Agreement: The CPA and the CFA will meet HWU on a regular basis to discuss problem areas. Shop steward committees may meet with local hospital management and union officials may have access to the hospital premises. The union has, therefore, won the right to organise and to negotiate.

● **End to privatisation:** Workers fear they may lose their jobs and their benefits should the government sell off public hospitals to the private sector. Also, they are concerned that people will be unable to afford hospital treatment should privatisation go ahead.

Agreement: The Administration will consult with the union and workers in considering any form of privatisation. In the event of privatisation, it was agreed that employees should lose neither their jobs nor benefits acquired during their employ in the public service. In addition, workers employed in areas which are to be privatised are to be given the option of joining the private enterprise or of remaining in the public service. In the latter case, alternative employment will be found for them.

If this agreement is adhered to, contracting out of services, for example, becomes far less attractive to the CPA as one of the major motivations for privatisation - that of cutting costs - no longer holds.

Workers' grievances were ignored

These demands had been expressed to the authorities through the official channels for over a year. The grievances were ignored and, having exhausted all other options, workers from 3 hospitals decided to embark on a 2 day strike in 1988. They returned to work after assurances that their demands would be addressed.

The authorities did not, however, give the matter significant attention and 2 weeks before the strike this year, workers from Groote Schuur Hospital repeated these demands to the authorities. They were told that their demands would not be met. On 3 March 1990, workers decided to take strike action. They were soon joined by workers from about 17 other hospitals in Cape Town. Workers from NEHAWU also joined the strike in solidarity.

While certain of the demands were met (as outlined above) the strike ended and workers decided to reassess the situation on 16 April, pending a response to their wage demands. On the 14 April all general hospital assistants were granted a wage increase over and above the 10% increase to civil servants. HWU members did not see the increase as significant and a letter was written to the CFA to discuss the issue. The response was that the CFA was not prepared to meet again with HWU. Another letter was sent with no response.

When NEHAWU went out on strike in the Transvaal, HWU workers went on a 6 hour work stoppage in solidarity, and also to protest the refusal of the CFA to meet with HWU. HWU will shortly be presenting their demands once again to the CPA.