

WORKERS IN THE STATE SECTOR

The state has found ways and means to keep the various categories of civil servants united under common interests. At the same time, the state has brought about division amongst other sections of workers. This means that it becomes very difficult to organise workers in the state sector into unions, as their interests seem so different.

What is the 'public sector', 'state sector', or 'civil sector'?

The 'public sector' includes all businesses, departments or other institutions which produce goods or provide services and which are totally or partly owned by the state.

Services such as roads, hospitals, traffic police, sanitary and other services are handled by provincial administrations and local municipalities. Both these regional (provincial) and local (municipal) levels of government cannot be different in policy from the central government.

The Commission for Administration lays down the employment condition for people working in the central state sector and in the provincial administrations. This commission can make recommendations, but they have to be approved by a second party, usually a cabinet minister.

Workers employed by provincial administration authorities have very similar wages and working conditions as workers employed by the central state authorities.

Health workers, along with administrative and clerical workers and forestry workers, fall under the civil sector.

The civil sector has grown over the last few years. It is likely to grow even more with the opening of the new departments for 'general' and 'own affairs'.

The civil sector has traditionally been marked by job reservation and racial discrimination. Blacks employed in the civil sector in the past usually had to do menial tasks, and they were employed in temporary positions. This is still the case for non-classified workers employed in the provincial hospitals. On the other hand, the state is trying to make the public service more attractive to black people. The state would like to see more black people working as 'officials' in the state sector, so as to give them a stake in its political system. But even so, they are likely to be confined to departments of 'own affairs'.

Race and class divisions in the state sector

There are three kinds of employees in the civil sector:

- 'officials' with permanent posts. They include administrative officials, clerks, professionals (such as engineers and lawyers), artisans, and all those who have a specific technical skill or qualification. They fall into the "General A Division". Most of them are given supervisory positions, for instance matrons, inspectors, storemen and others.
- 'non-classified workers': they are either temporary workers or contract workers. They usually do manual jobs. Contract workers are worst off: They are usually employed for specific tasks or projects, and once these have been finished off, their contracts run out. Contract workers therefore face extreme job insecurity.

The class division between 'officials' and temporary workers can further be traced through the state's personnel strategy. The state wishes to co-opt the permanent officials; they are the ones who get offered

increased benefits in return for their loyalty. Temporary workers, in contrast, are discriminated against. Every attempt is made to divide them, so that they will not take any united action. They did not get any improvement in wages, benefits, and working conditions over the years. Contract workers, again, are worst off: they get absolutely no benefits.

The sweetheart unions

The racial and class division can also be seen in the unions into which the 'officials' and the 'non-classified workers' have been organised.

At the moment, there are three unions, called 'staff associations':

- The Public Servants Association (PSA), which caters for white employees only. PSA members are permanently employed 'officials'.
- The Public Servant's Union (PSU), which caters for Indian employees only. PSU membership is made up by permanently employed 'officials'.
- The Public Servants' League of South Africa (PSL), which is multiracial. The majority of the PSL's members are temporary workers.

There is conflict between the temporary workers' union (PSL) and the two 'officials'' unions (PSA and PSU).

The PSA and PSU (the 'officials'' unions) are sympathetic to the state's new deal, whereas the PSL (the temporary workers' multiracial union) upholds ideals of union democracy and worker control. The PSL is somewhat critical of the state's moves. But the PSL itself has no independent bargaining-power. It is controlled from above by the authorities in the various departments of the state sector.

Until now, no democratic or independent recognised trade union has been able to represent workers in the civil sector. The result is that the sweetheart staff associations PSA and PSU have gone unchallenged.



Pensions

In the same way as state employees are divided between 'officials' and 'non-classified' staff, and as their unions are divided, so, too, are the benefits that the different categories of staff are getting.

At the moment, there are two pension schemes. The Government Service Pension Fund is for permanent officials, and the Temporary Employees' Pension Fund is for temporary workers. Contract workers are not covered by any pension provisions.

'Officials' automatically enter the pension fund. 8% of their monthly salary gets deducted for pension. Their pension fund includes gratuity and annuity.

In the case of temporary workers, it was a long battle to secure pension provisions. Temporary workers do not enter the fund automatically. They have to wait for two years before they can contribute. They pay 5% of their monthly wage towards the pension fund. Workers are not paid a gratuity if they have more than 10 years' pensionable service. Instead, an increased annuity is paid in the form of a monthly pension. This measure caused a great deal of tension among workers in the civil sector.



Housing loans and subsidies

Housing loans and subsidies are usually counted as the advantages of working in the government sector. On paper, all state employees can apply for housing loans and subsidies. But, in practice, it is only 'officials' who get these benefits. Most temporary workers live in council houses, shared houses, or they use makeshift accommodation. This is what makes them unable to apply for housing benefits.

For those workers who have been able to buy houses, getting a loan and subsidy is still not automatic. Workers must be over 21 years of age and have contributed to the pension fund before they can apply for a housing loan or subsidy. This means that workers will have to wait for at least three years before they can even start applying - two years before they can contribute to the pension fund and one year of contributing to the pension fund.

Secondly, the loans are pegged to salaries. Because wages are low, loans and subsidies are very small. Ordinary workers often find it difficult even to raise the deposit to put down on a house.

All these factors make it almost impossible for a temporary worker to buy a house. This privilege, in most cases, is only to be enjoyed by 'officials'.

Where housing benefits are made available, they usually become a way of controlling workers. For those workers who do eventually get a housing subsidy are very cautious about joining a union and taking part in worker action.

TERRIBLE WORKING CONDITIONS

TEMPORARY STATUS

This means that any local-rate-of-pay worker can be fired with 24 hours notice.

For example: In 1984, a worker was fired, because the wards she was looking after "were dirty". It was also said that "she had been cheeky to a supervisor" and that she had been caught drinking tea in a side-ward.

The authorities ignored the fact that the wards she was looking after were terribly overcrowded.

A sister working in that ward gave an affidavit:

"...She was a very good worker, and the ward was always neat. I see no reason for her to have been fired."



LEAVE

If a domestic is pregnant, she gets no accouchement leave. She has to resign, and may be re-employed after delivery. But she will have lost all the benefits from her previous work.

When one of our workers lost her mother, she was given not a single days leave. In fact she had to work until lunchtime on the day of the funeral.



LONG HOURS OF WORK

How would you feel about working these hours?

The domestics in our hospital...

- work 9 hours a day
- have only one day off per week
- have 19 days leave per year
- get half-an-hour for lunch and two tea breaks



NO TRUE REPRESENTATION

- We demand a democratic structure, that will represent us, and that will deal with our grievances.
- We demand a proper disciplinary protocol: If there is a dispute, the worker must have the right to call on assistance from a member of that democratic structure.
- We reject the Hospital Employees Association, because it has failed to deal with our grievances in an effective way.

Other grievances

Workers in the civil sector complain about other things, such as

- no job promotion
- inadequate training
- injuries on duty
- working hours

These grievances have hardly been addressed, as union organisation in the civil sector is still weak. What makes this situation very difficult is the fact that public sector workers do not fall under the Labour Relations Act, and therefore there is no formal grievance procedure.

Union organisation

Union organisation in all areas of public employment is extremely difficult. As we have said, before, workers are divided according to

- permanent and temporary or contract positions
- the benefits that they can get (housing loan and pension)
- the degree of job security
- race and class (and in some cases, residential area) which determine the wages of the workers
- their membership of 'staff associations'



These divisions make united action very difficult.

Apart from these divisions which disorganise and isolate workers, workers find that their workplace is controlled very tightly. Moreover, if workers do express their grievances, it is difficult to find out whom to address them to. For example, wages at a hospital are not laid down by the medical superintendent. It is the Commission for Administration who is responsible for laying down the wage structure. This commission is far away from the scene of conflict. There is no way in which the workers can negotiate with the authorities at their workplace.

Until now, there has been very little conflict between workers and authorities in the state sector. This is because workers are divided, and only very few black workers are organised in unions, and because workers in the public sector may not go on strike. The staff associations (PSA, PSU, PSL) are helping the state to control and divide workers. Within these sweetheart unions, there is hardly any possibility for bargaining. Issues such as work rules, dispute procedure, and working hours are simply not discussed.

Nevertheless, some independent trade unions have started organising public sector workers, even though these unions are not recognised. The workers who have signed up for these unions are mostly temporary and contract workers. They are the ones who bear the brunt of low wages and bad working conditions, and have nothing to gain from the sweetheart unions. In some cases, also, workers have taken matters into their own hands. Whenever workers did express their grievances, they have been faced with a heavy-handed response from the state. The state has responded to workstoppages by dismissing workers. The authorities refuse to negotiate with worker representatives from any union.

What has become clear through all this, is that organising in the public sector, to be successful, must take place on a national basis. Too often, worker action

has been sporadic and isolated, and workers have been defeated and demoralised. A national health workers' union, organised on the basis of various departments within the health services, would give workers at a particular workplace more strength.

This article is drawn from Marcel Golding's article, Workers in the State Sector, South African Labour Bulletin, vol. 10, no 15, March-April 1985

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would like to appoint a part-time

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The job entails:

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- fundraising
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Application

Apply in writing to: Critical Health
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INTERESTED IN RURAL HEALTH CARE?

THE HEALTH SERVICES DEVELOPMENT UNIT is looking for a doctor to work at Tintswalo Hospital (near Acornhoek in the Eastern Transvaal.)

WHAT FOR?

We need someone to help us train Primary Health Care Nurses. We run a year long course which is recognised by the South African Nursing Council. Our aim is to produce PHCNs who can diagnose and treat, manage clinics, and understand the relationship between health and conditions in the wider society.

WHAT IS THE HEALTH SERVICES DEVELOPMENT UNIT?

The HSDU is a unit within the Department of Community Health at Wits Medical School. The Unit is based at Tintswalo Hospital. Apart from the PHCN training programme, we also have the following projects:

- Training the trainers of primary health care workers.
- A continuing learning programme for PHCN graduates.
- Writing texts for the PHCN training course.
- Working with village based women's groups.
- A sanitation project.

WHAT SKILLS DO YOU NEED?

We are looking for someone with the following qualities:

- Some clinical experience.
- Some understanding of the health problems in rural areas.
- A commitment to providing good health care in rural areas.
- Some teaching experience - preferably in adult education.

The post is available immediately, but may be held open for a good applicant. Applicants should be prepared to commit themselves to at least one, and preferably two years at Tintswalo Hospital.

For further information contact Cedric de Beer at (011) 647-2269 or Margie Cairns at 647-2369.

Submit applications, with a Curriculum Vitae, and the names and addresses of two referees to Margie Cairns, Dept of Community Health, Medical School, 7 York Rd. Parktown.