

## Survey of Health Workers at R K Khan Hospital

Below we print extracts from a report compiled by the Chatsworth Health Committee (CHC) on the position of unskilled workers in R K Khan Hospital. The Report throws further light on the Durban Hospital strikes reported in SALB 10.5. The CHC is an association of professional health workers.

### Background

The R K Khan Provincial Hospital, which serves a major section of the so-called Indian population in the Durban and surrounding areas, has been in existence for approximately 16 years. A major contribution to the effective running of the hospital is made by the porters, cleaners, gardeners, kitchen staff, security, etc - who are collectively labelled the Non-Classified Workers (NCW), +/- 278 in all. As the hospital is situated in Unit 5, Chatsworth, it draws on the ready supply of labour from the surrounding township - being complimented by workers from Merebank, Shallcross, Clairwood and Phoenix.

From the inception of the hospital, the workers have not been consulted on a regular basis on basic issues of wages and conditions. Around 1979 a pseudo "Workers Committee" was formed comprising of members from the Administration as well as the NCW. This committee has "closed shop" meetings without effective communication with the workers. The majority of the workers feel that this committee is unrepresentative and ineffective in taking up their problems.

The main grievance of the workers has been that their salaries have not kept up with the continuing rise in the cost of living. The Administration has repeatedly claimed that they have taken up this issue by writing numerous letters to the relevant authorities. The failure of such feeble attempts has frustrated the workers. Thus on 7 September 1984, over 200 workers went on a work stoppage to demand increased wages. Although the stoppage lasted only 45 minutes, this marked the end of fifteen years of quiet acceptance by the workers. The somewhat surprised Administration reacted with varied feelings. While they promised to make "serious" representations to the Natal Provincial Administration on behalf of the work-

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ers, they also threatened some workers with dismissal if they persisted with the work stoppage.

In October 1984, the CHC called a meeting of interested workers to discuss possible ways of improving the plight of the NCW. A Workers Adhoc Committee, under the auspices of CHC, was formed. Some of the aims of this committee were:

- (i) to unite all NCWs
- (ii) to focus attention on the plight of the NCW
- (iii) to increase the interaction between different sectors of health workers in the hospital
- (iv) to relate to fellow health workers in other hospitals
- (v) to enlist the support of interested organisations.

As the workers had still not received an increase in salary, the Workers Adhoc Committee called for a boycott of the annual Christmas dinner (20/12/84). The new aim of the boycott was to highlight the plight of the NCW to the hospital authorities, other health workers and the community at large. The Administration reacted viciously by threatening the workers with dismissal and victimising certain members of the Workers Adhoc Committee. This hostile response by the Administration to the planned boycott intimidated many workers into attending the dinner. The Christmas dinners held in other provincial hospitals in Durban were also boycotted.

In February 1985, a mass meeting of NCW from all the provincial hospitals in Durban was called by the Health and Allied Workers Union (HAWU) - an affiliate of the National Federation of Workers - to discuss the issue of low salaries and plan a co-ordinated programme of action. The workers unanimously decided to go on a work stoppage on 4 February 1985 until a significant increase was made to their salaries.

On the morning of 4 February, the workers at R K Khan Hospital reported to work but did not assume their duties. They were confronted by members of the Administration and the hospital security who intimidated and threatened the workers with immediate dismissal and this scared them into returning to work.

At the King Edward Hospital, the NCW (including the hospital security) were resolute in their unity and the strike had lasted five days. All strikers were dismissed and charged for trespassing. Through negotiations between the shop stewards,

HAWU and the Administration (PMB) all the workers were reinstated, all charges for trespasses were dropped and a 15-20% increase in salary was won.

### The survey

This report aims to clarify, and provide evidence for, the reasons why the workers at R K Khan hospital went on strike. In the latter part of 1984, faced with spiralling inflation and no substantive salary increases, workers met and began formulating a strategy to ensure that something would be done about their plight. As these workers were at the bottom end of the salary scale, they were hardest hit by the increases in GST, fuel, housing, and so on. One worker summed up the impact of inflation on NCWs as follows:

When they give us a small increase, they give us according to our grade, but when they put up the bread price, fuel prices, GST, they put up for everybody just the same.

As a result of the concern expressed by workers, the CHC decided to interview the NCWs and determine the exact nature of their work conditions, living conditions and grievances in the work situation. In order to ensure that the full range of attitudes of NCWs was covered, a fairly large sample of NCWs was randomly selected. A variation of "quota sampling" was used and in all a random sample of 179 NCWs selected and interviewed in their homes. These 179 NCWs represent 64% of all NCWs at R K Khan and allow us to be confident that the results presented below reflect the views and characteristics of all NCWs at R K Khan.

### Characteristics of the sample

The worker's salaries were very low with 3 out of every 4 NCWs earning less than R220 per month. At the same time, these workers had served the Natal Provincial Administration very well with the majority having spent most of their working life with the N.P.A. One would be hard pressed to find comparable "work-service" records in other industries. Not only had these workers been employed for a long time, but the number of hours worked by each was high: 99% of the NCWs worked for more than 45 hours per week. For our purposes, then, these descriptive statistics suggest that the NCWs are not paid very much relative to the number of hours they work

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Table 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Sex	Male	83 (46%)
	Female	96 (54%)
Education	None	50 (28%)
	Up to Std. 5	85 (48%)
	Std. 6 to Std. 10	43 (24%)
Age	Less than 29 yrs	31 (17%)
	30-39 yrs	35 (20%)
	40-60 yrs	100 (56%)
	Greater than 60 yrs	12 (7%)
Service to N.P.A	Less than 5 yrs	66 (37%)
	6-10 yrs	36 (20%)
	11-20 yrs	52 (29%)
	Greater than 20 yrs	25 (14%)
Nature of work	Cleaner	102 (57%)
	Supervisor	7 (4%)
	Remainder non-supervisory	70 (39%)
Present Salary per month	Less than R160	61 (34%)
	R160-R219	71 (40%)
	Greater than R220	47 (26%)
Rent	Less than R80	66 (37%)
	R80-R99	58 (32%)
	Greater than R100	55 (31%)
Transport costs	Less than R15	120 (67%)
	Greater than R15	59 (33%)
Hours worked per week	Less than 45	3 (2%)
	45-49	114 (64%)
	Greater than 50	62 (35%)

and, collectively, they have an outstanding work record.

Finally, note must be made of the general living conditions experienced by the workers (see Table 2). On average, NCWs

live in six-person households where at least two people are permanently employed. Of the 1,050 people living in the households of these 179 NCWs, there was an even split among the sexes, and about 43% were of school-going age.

Table II: HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS

Sex	Male	522 (50%)
	Female	528 (50%)
Age	Less than 5 yrs	92
	6-9 yrs	64
	10-18 yrs	269
	19-29 yrs	266
	30-39 yrs	103
	40-60 yrs	223
	Greater than 60 yrs	44
Total Household Income	Less than R400	62 (35%)
	R400-R799	64 (36%)
	Greater than R800	53 (29%)

### Worker grievances

In compiling the questionnaire the CHC attempted to provide the means for determining precisely those issues about which workers were aggrieved. Thus, they asked the NCWs to identify their specific problems. Table 3 indicates the responses to these questions.

Table III: WORKER GRIEVANCES

Grievance	Yes	No	Not Applicable
Transport to work	75 (42%)	104 (58%)	
Maternity benefits	7 (4%)	24 (13%)	148 (83%)
Creche needed	176 (98%)	3 (2%)	
Salary	172 (96%)	7 (4%)	
Working hours	49 (27%)	130 (73%)	
Fringe benefits	105 (59%)	51 (29%)	23 (13%)
Working conditions	27 (15%)	144 (80%)	8 (5%)

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Most important grievances

(1) Wages and salaries stand out as the issue of most concern to NCWs. First, the most important concern of workers is that their wages are extremely low and do not keep pace with inflation, and that in fact the necessities of life (food, shelter and clothing) take a very large slice out of one's pay packet. This point may quite easily be demonstrated through an analysis of the costs of housing and transport to work. If we compare the cost of accomodation and transport to work with the salaries people earn the following situation is found:

Table IV: COST OF ACCOMODATION AND TRANSPORT

Income Group	Ave. Wage (1)	Ave. Cost (2)	(2) as % of (1)
Less than R160	R138.00	R100.70	73%
R160-220	R197.60	R111.85	57%
Greater than R220	R238.93	R120.72	51%

Note: The average costs are only those for rent and transport to work and do not include food, cloths, education, health et

In other words, almost all the NCWs are paying out the major proportion of their salary on housing and transport to work. While one recognises that such a table ignores the fact that most households have two wage earners it is nevertheless staggering as these "worker-households" must still find money for food, utilities, clothing and so on. At the same time, one should realise that these workers are highly dependent on public transport (buses and trains) for getting to work and are thus more susceptible to the vicissitudes of inflation.

(2) Workers showed a certain amount of concern with the criteria used for upgrading their posts. In fact, there appears to have been almost no vertical mobility amongst these NCWs. In brief, the salaries earned by NCWs fall into three grades. These divisions cause uncertainty and dissension for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, there is no evidence that these grades are linked to either a worker's length of service or their education.

On the other hand, there appears to be almost no chance of vertical mobility. For example, given that cleaners tend to be on the lowest grade, one would expect that those who have longer service would not be cleaners. However, this is not the case: there is the same proportion of cleaners in each "length of service" category. At the same time, there is no evidence that those who have been working for the N.P.A. for a longer period of time get paid more. In fact, the evidence is that after six years service there is no appreciable increase in one's salary. For example, the average wage of those employed with the N.P.A. for between 6 and 10 years is R222 per month whereas the average wage of those with greater than 10 years experience is only R228 per month.

- (3) A further major issue of concern to workers revolves around the provision of child care facilities. As mentioned before, NCWs come from households where at least two people have to work, and thus children have to be provided for. The survey provides evidence that at least 30% of NCWs who have children have to leave them to their own devices when they go to work! The remaining 70% are forced to rely on relatives to care for their children. The issue of child care provision could easily be overcome at R K Khan Hospital, as presently, the children of trained nurses may go to the hospital creche, but not the children of "domestic" workers.
- (4) Another area of concern to workers revolved around the payment of their Provident Fund. Eighty-eight percent of the NCWs wished that their Provident Fund was paid to them as a lump sum and were dissatisfied with the present system whereby these monies are paid on a monthly basis.

#### Other important issues

- (1) A significant number of workers voiced concern over the poor fringe benefits available for them at R K Khan Hospital. In particular, NCWs expressed concern that the services of the hospital creche, maternity benefits, and housing subsidies were denied to them. Furthermore, those NCWs who were injured on duty were not eligible for benefits in compliance with the Workmen's Compensation Act.

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(2) A significant area of concern to workers was the problem associated with getting to work. Eighty-eight percent of the workers relied on either buses and/or trains to get to work. The cost associated with such services and the irregularity of the service were seen as major problems.

### Lesser grievances

Finally, we need to note that this survey of NCWs indicated that working conditions, working hours and maternity benefits were not considered to be major problems by the workers. The response given for the maternity benefits could be due to the fact that the number of people affected is relatively small and of limited duration, only during a woman's child-bearing years. It is difficult to interpret the responses on the working conditions and hours. It was obvious in conducting the survey that the workers were uninformed of their conditions of employment and their rights as workers, eg. many were unsure of their number of sick leave days per year.

### Attitudes towards worker organisation

As mentioned previously, there exists at present at R K Khan Hospital a Non-Classified Workers Committee. However, it is not held in high esteem as a problem solver. In fact, 71% of the NCWs were unhappy with it as it does not take up their grievances. At present the NCWs feel that supervisors deal more effectively with worker problems and 62% of the workers suggested that action is taken when they raise a problem with supervisors. While supervisors may take up minor problems on behalf of the workers, their ability to deal as a collective bargaining agent is severely restricted. Thus, the NCWs were almost unanimous in calling for an organisation which would ensure workers' interests are represented to the authorities.

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