

Greater unity in the public sector

by RENE ROUX

There is a buzzing enthusiasm when leaders of the public sector meet, which for the last two months has been a regular occasion. At last S A Municipal Workers Union, S A Railway and Harbours Workers Union, Post Office and Telecommunication Workers Association and National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union have found the time to co-ordinate their efforts towards strengthening organisation in the public sector. All agree it is long overdue, that similar problems and changing conditions in this sector make united action an urgent task.

They have chosen to bring their structures and resources together in common opposition to creeping privatisation of state corporations and institutions. The guiding principle at this stage is *UNITY IN ACTION*, rather than the formation of permanent structures and constitutions at this stage.

Public sector unions agree the best weapon against privatisation is strong organisation in the private sector, and their planned joint campaigns will be

aimed at achieving this. They recognise that their duty to the entire democratic movement is to spearhead resistance to privatisation, as this could be the most vicious attack yet by the state and capital on the living conditions of the vast majority of South Africans, black and white.

Changing conditions

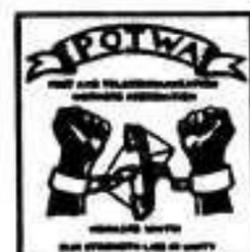
The deepening economic and political crisis has raised privatisation as a serious option for the state and capital in the last few years. While the state hopes to solve its debt crisis by selling off its assets, capital is desperate for new areas of investment in the shrinking economy. Having abandoned

the white working class as a constituency which has long enjoyed protected employment in the public sector, the state no longer cares about the social effects of privatisation.

The rate and exact nature of privatisation will

differ between corporations such as SATS on the one hand, for which legislation is already underway, and services such as schools and hospitals on the other. This means privatisation will affect the four unions in different ways. But they are already feeling the effects as the state prepares for privatisation.

In SATS the effect on employment levels are more dramatic than elsewhere (see article on SARHWU). But generally the unions experience tight-



ning up. Retrenchments, the partially successful wage freeze, legislation aimed at weakening worker organisation, changing management structures and the formation of "business units", are all aimed at greater profitability.

The respective unions speak of increasing use of technology to replace workers, hidden retrenchments through dismissals, forced ill-health and early retirements and demotions, to the point that white workers are doing menial tasks, while management complain that they do not have the budget to create jobs.

Capital attracted by conditions in the public sector

Ultimately, unions agree that capital is particularly attracted to the public sector because of the low level of organisation and working conditions that prevail throughout. When a developed infrastructure and sophisticated technology have been developed in this sector, capital will definitely have an added advantage if privatisation could happen as fast as prospective investors desire.

Decades of archaic and racist labour practices have left workers in an incredibly vulnerable position. Thousands of African workers in the public sector are still regarded as "temporary" and migrant. Brutal disciplinary codes and a proliferation of "sweet-heart" staff associations which reinforce the skills hierarchy, have all combined to weaken organisations and dilute the demands of the majority unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Structures for unity

The individual public sector unions recognise that a lot of time and energy will be wasted if they continue to organise their respective sectors in isolation from each other. They all face enormous problems of recognition, wages and working conditions, the temporary status of workers, the existence of conservative staff associations, and now privatisation. What's more, only about 80,000 out of a total of 500,000 workers in the public sector are organised.

The unions have not yet decided whether they should ultimately merge into one union. They believe that practical co-operation will show what form of unity would be most appropriate in the public sector. At this stage the respective unions need to address the peculiarities of their sector. Joint structures are being established at national, regional and local level to facilitate and encourage organising drives and campaigns. What proposals emerge from joint workshops or joint NEC's, will have to be fully ratified by the structures of each individual union.

The four unions agree that the central tasks are to organise public sector workers into strong unions and to be in a position to fight privatisation in united action or hopefully scare capital off altogether! How and when more formal structures of co-operation emerge in the future will depend on the process of struggle and whether workers will see the need for a general public sector union. ☆