



Photo by Cecil Solis, Dynamic Images

"We had no other choice"... Baragwanath strikers picket outside the hospital

STRIKE!

Should health workers go on strike?

This has been a burning issue following the strike of general hospital workers, like cleaners, assistants and drivers, around the country.

The government says "no", the strike puts patients at risk. The National, Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) says "yes", all workers should have the right to strike.

SPEAK asked a striker,

Should health workers have the right to strike or are patients' rights more important?

By Thoraya Pandey

doctor, nurse, patient and Nehawu shopsteward from hospitals around Johannesburg what they felt. We also tried to talk to strike-breakers. They wouldn't speak to us saying they were scared of being attacked.

Striking ambulance driver

Gladys Mlangeni said she was not happy about striking, but had no other choice.

"One of the patients could be my mother or sister, but how can anyone survive on the R460 a month some workers earn? I earn R1 000 and it is very difficult to support my family of five on that. I cannot see how others manage on less.

"White and black workers are treated differently. We drive the same ambulances, but

are paid less than white drivers.

"We deserve to be treated with respect and to get a decent salary."

She said it upsets her when the government says workers do not care about patients.

"The government never cares about people who die of malnutrition and TB everyday. If they cared for the patients why did they refuse our offer of a small emergency staff?" she asked.

Mlangeni explained workers offered to provide a small staff for emergency departments during the strike.

"The authorities said 'no'. This proved they were not interested in the patients."

Peter Ngatane, a doctor at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, said he supports the strikers. He, like all doctors, was not on strike.



Photo by Cecil Sois, Dynamic Images

Hospitals around the country have been hit by strikes this year



Photo by William Marisa

"The government never cares about people who die of malnutrition and TB everyday," says ambulance driver Gladys Mlangeni

"Not one of the workers' demands was met," he said. "They say there is no money but daily we hear of corruption in the government."

SPEAK asked Ngatane if he would ever go on strike.

"Yes, if my working conditions were as bad as these workers, I definitely would. But my patient must not suffer because of my strike. Those under my care would still get my care."

A patient at Baragwanath hospital, Joyce Malukene, who was in hospital after a car accident, said she understands why workers were striking.

"I support them," said

Malukene. "I would also go on strike if I was a hospital worker."

She said the strike did not affect her as badly as it did some patients.

"Some operations have been cancelled and people are sent home early. If they finish my operation they say I will be sent home.

"People will always get hurt in a struggle. The only thing which makes me sad is black people get hurt the most. In this case, it is the patient and the worker. I am worried about the families of the strikers who are not getting salaries."

A nurse, who asked not to be named, said she supports the strike, but she would not join.

"The lives of patients must always come first. If nurses should strike then lives will be lost."

She said nurses were under a lot of stress because of the strike.

"We work twice as hard, but I am not angry at the workers. I am angry at the authorities for making no effort to solve the matter! It is important for the state to admit these workers are just as important as doctors and nurses."

SPEAK also talked to Nehawu **shopsteward** Martha Kolanisi.

"Our decision to strike did not just fall from the sky. It came after four years of begging. The bubble of anger finally burst. There was just no other way," said Kolanisi, a nurse at Hillbrow Hospital.



Photo by Cecil Scobis Dynamic Images

Volunteers took on some of the work, like cleaning and serving food which was not done because of the strike

She said health workers were very worried about the patients.

"Many of us feel guilty. One of the patients could be family or friends. We care about them, but we also need to survive and have our jobs taken seriously."

Why did hospital workers go on strike?

General hospital workers (cleaners, drivers and ward assistants) at state hospitals in the Transvaal went on strike on 1 May 1992. Weeks later, workers at hospitals across the country joined them.

Doctors were not part of the strike. Some nurses joined, but most did not.

Here are some of the demands workers made:

- One national bargaining forum (at the moment the union has to negotiate with 14 different state health administrations);
- An increase of the minimum (lowest) wage;
- a 15% increase;

- permanent status for all workers (at the moment many workers are temporary and do not get benefits like pension and medical aid)

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union first made some of these demands over four years ago. In 1990, hospital workers went on strike but decided to return to work so the government could consider the demands. Early this year the government still had not met most of the demands.

"This strike has risen out of years and years of struggle," said Aslam Dasso, spokesperson for the South African Health and Social Services Organisation (Sahsso).

"The government's health budget was increased this year, so I can't understand why there is no money to increase the workers' salaries. There is also a lot of overspending - like keeping 14 different health administrations going." ●