

'400 000 members in 2002'

Labour Bulletin: Which sectors do you organise?

NEHAWU: We organise in five sectors, being the state administration, public health, private health, social welfare and tertiary education.

Labour Bulletin: How many members do you have and have membership numbers increased or decreased?

NEHAWU: Twelve years ago we started with about 5 000 members. By 1992, we had 45 000 members. By our congress in April 1998 we were at 190 000 and right now we are standing at 250 000 members. In the late '80s and early '90s we had struggles for recognition, struggles for wages, struggles for inclusion in the LRA and struggles for other conditions of employment such as the permanent status of so-called temporary workers in the public service. Those struggles helped grow membership.

When we first restructured NEHAWU in 1992, we put an organising programme in place and established organising committees. They did a lot of work in accumulating more membership for ourselves. We have also grown through merging and integrating with provincial organisations. We want to have 400 000 members in the year 2002 and we have embarked on a campaign to do this. Part of

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the campaign is to get a two-thirds majority for the ANC in the upcoming elections.

Labour Bulletin: Who sits on your organising committee?

NEHAWU: Our union is divided into four levels – the national, provincial, branch and institutional. Organising committees are formed by shopstewards at institutional level, because this is where the membership is. Any member of NEHAWU has the potential to organise workers, therefore you have those committees in different institutions of NEHAWU.

Each committee has a co-ordinator – these co-ordinators in the institutions meet at branch level and form an organising committee at a branch level. The institutional co-ordinators will give reports at the branch level.

Co-ordinators from each and every branch organising committee meet at a provincial level. At provincial level they

talk about organising problems and also advise each other on how to deal with issues that are coming up. Every provincial organising committee will have a co-ordinator who sits on the national organising committee. The national organising committee looks at the problems being experienced by provinces. It also raises issues like the question of benefits in the union – how will you benefit if you become a member of NEHAWU?

Labour Bulletin: Are you recruiting new layers of members?

NEHAWU: Yes we have new categories of workers. You have the academics from the tertiary institutions that are members of NEHAWU. You also have members who are managers coming from the government institutions and managers in public health and in private health. You have prosecutors, magistrates and advocates that are members of NEHAWU. We are also part of the bargaining arrangements for prosecutors and advocates. You don't only find NEHAWU members in the lower levels. Government, for instance, has 16 grades in their grading system and NEHAWU has members in all those 16 layers.

Labour Bulletin: What is NEHAWU doing about casual workers and subcontracting?

NEHAWU: NEHAWU's position is absolute opposition to casualisation and subcontracting of labour. These are some of the methods used by capitalists to extort super profits from workers through low wages, cheap labour and job insecurity.

As an organisation that serves the interests of workers we will try by all means to make sure that there is not subcontracting and casual work. We defend against contracting out but

sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. In the cases where we are not able to prevent it we then make sure that the service of workers is not broken. The years of service of those workers and also their wages must be transferred with those workers. People must not be worse off in terms of being transferred. We negotiate deals for workers besides the severance package. We negotiate that there should be training for those workers, so they can have some other skills that they can sell in other spheres of the labour market.

We also go for a social plan that may include the workers getting ownership of a company. A good example of this is in the restructuring of forests where workers would be allowed (with help from the government) to get money to buy shares in the forests. That means that workers will also become shareowners of those forests.

Labour Bulletin: That is quite a controversial thing to be doing. Some may say, how will you be able to oppose the bosses if you become bosses yourselves?

NEHAWU: It may be controversial, but you have to look at the dangers and benefits. You also need to look at strategic considerations in each case. We look at the dangers but also ask how would you benefit if you stayed out? Let's take an example of the forests that are going to be sold. In this case, if workers did not buy shares you would have a board of directors that does not include workers. The result will be that the condition of workers will go down day by day. If you become a shareholder, the conditions of workers will be looked after. If you become a shareowner and have a seat on the board of directors you will know what is going on and if there is a need for retrenchments. You will be able to look for

alternatives to retrenchments because you will have information. However, these are not easy questions. In each case we need to look at the pros and the cons and what alternatives we have. At the end of the day, we will always decide to do what is in workers' best interests

Labour Bulletin: What does NEHAWU do to promote women leadership and gender issues?

NEHAWU: We are a union that is championing the struggle for gender equality. We took a resolution long ago to have a 50/50 quota system. We have achieved this by 90%. Only here and there it is not being reached. We are working towards a resolution on the development of women leadership. At our national congress last year we took a resolution to appoint a full-time national gender co-ordinator to set up programmes for women development to be integrated into our education programme. I think that in relation to gender issues we are one of the advanced unions in COSATU.

Labour Bulletin: What challenges does NEHAWU face?

NEHAWU: Key among the challenges is the defence of jobs and job security. Job losses in our sector are daily becoming a stark reality. They are a result of the implementation of neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes as manifested in the cutback in social spending which results in privatisation, outsourcing and contracting out of public assets. The end result of all this is the loss of jobs for masses of workers through retrenchments. For example, 900 workers were retrenched in one go at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape last year. We also won a court case against the

University of Transkei when it did not use the correct procedures when retrenching our members. These examples are merely the tip of the iceberg, compared to the whole threat on job security posed by the structural adjustment programme.

Transformation of the public sector is one of the challenges facing us as a union. The public sector, under the previous rule, was designed to favour racist divisions. We are now faced with the task of assisting in transforming it to be compatible with non-racial democratic needs. We also face the task of assisting to ensure that there is equitable service delivery.

Another challenge is corruption in the public service. As a union we oppose corruption. In some cases the corruption involves our members.

Labour Bulletin: How are you engaging the government on policies that may affect your members?

NEHAWU: We are striving to influence policy formation. Our 1998 congress opposed GEAR because it brings cuts in social spending. We have seen services in hospitals declining, and education declining. We want to be proactive rather than reactive. We try to get involved in bilaterals with the relevant government department. Two years ago there was an announcement that the government would have done away with 300 000 people by 1999. We have signed an agreement to audit state employees in every department and every province. We are checking the service needs of the province so that we can match it to the skills of employees. People may be moved to different state departments to ensure that they have the skills that are needed.

Labour Bulletin: Can you assess the state of the alliance?



NEHAWU organises in the public and private health sectors.

NEHAWU: Some structures are stable, but others are not very strong. NEHAWU's strategy is to make sure that we participate and deploy cadres into the alliance structures. We need to strengthen the alliance for transformation – labour cannot do it alone. We are making sure that we are putting working class interests to the alliance.

Labour Bulletin: *What are you doing for the upcoming elections?*

NEHAWU: We have a congress resolution to release comrades to canvass for an ANC majority. We have a cohesive structure dealing with campaigns. At provincial level our structures are participating fully. We have teams organising institutional meetings to canvass for the elections. Provinces have lists of institutions to be visited and comrades to be released. We have an election budget of about R450 000 to pay for lost wages for comrades working on the elections. Membership have been registering.

Labour Bulletin: *What are your demands for negotiations?*

NEHAWU: In the public service we are demanding an inflation-related increase. We are reviewing benefits and allowances. We are also looking at the grading system and new dispute procedures and grievance procedures. NEHAWU is dealing with decreased pension contributions by government. We are also closing the wage gap. In the private sector we are pushing for transformation. We do not want to just have black faces in higher positions. We want to ensure that there is a shift in power and control.

Job security is the main issue in the tertiary sector. We are also demanding national bargaining. We are moving towards having a strike in the tertiary sector around this demand. The issue has gone to Nedlac.

Labour Bulletin: *What successes have you had in negotiations in the past few years?*

NEHAWU: In the public service we are closing the wage gap. We have moved from 1 to 25 to 1 to 17. The gap between the lowest paid and the highest paid is closing.

We are now concentrating on the middle. We are aiming to reduce the wage gap to international levels of 1 to 12, but it is not an easy process. We have also won a demand in the public service to remove levels 13 to 16 because they are the people who are bargaining for government.

Labour Bulletin: What are the strengths and weaknesses of COSATU?

NEHAWU: A weakness is that since '93 we haven't had consistent leadership. In 1994 we lost two comrades to Parliament. Now we will lose four out of the six national office bearers. COSATU policies are very good, but it is difficult to realise them in practice, for example, privatisation. Are we consistent in sustaining our programme of action against privatisation?

For strengths, COSATU is one of the strongest parties in the alliance. Our programme is understood by the alliance and society. Our role in the Jobs Summit was very good. We are strong in numbers and unions are working towards unity and mergers. The 1998 COSATU congress resolved to demarcate sectors and form cartels. We are working towards realising that. For example, in public sector bargaining we co-operate with other COSATU affiliates and discuss our demands first to get a COSATU position. Mergers are not an easy process - NEHAWU and SAMWU failed to merge in the past. We will kick start meetings with SAMWU and SADTU.

Labour Bulletin: How does NEHAWU deploy its staff?

NEHAWU: We have about 200 staff nationally. In the mid-1990s we realised that our services were not efficient so we demarcated into sectors. Our 1995 CEC adopted a realignment programme to give efficient service to members. Last year we

restructured the union starting with head office. We established service centres - for example, organising, finance, international, secretariat and education. Head office and branches have got more staff than provinces. At provincial level there are about three staff members only. In restructuring we want to balance things. Provincial offices must establish service centres like head office and they must get more staff. We never had regional structures. Our experience has shown that they are essential because government is organised on a regional basis. We are considering establishing regional structures. We are also debating making each institution a branch itself.

Labour Bulletin: How has struggle changed?

NEHAWU: Comrades have not been able to really understand the LRA as it is. Before we would strike on demands. Now our people must understand procedure. Struggle is not on the streets anymore, but in the boardroom. We need to develop skills for this. The education department is addressing this.

Labour Bulletin: What message do you have for your members?

NEHAWU: Each member of NEHAWU should be an organiser. Our effort to increase numbers is aimed at playing an effective role in transforming the public sector and creating a better life.

Labour Bulletin: What message do you have for the bosses?

NEHAWU: NEHAWU, now as always, stands for the interests of workers and at no moment will we compromise the interests of our members and the working class, even when our boss is the state. ★