

Against rape culture

Nehawu forges alliance with students

When students took to the streets against rape culture at Rhodes University in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, workers joined the protests in solidarity. Amongst them was the National Health Education and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu)'s shop steward at the institution, Alfred Vena Zakede. **Elijah Chiwota** spoke to Zakede.



Phillip Ngxitho a former Nehawu shop steward sustained a right hand injury due to police action when he took part in the students' workers at Rhodes University. He works at the nursery and has been with the institution for 29 years and lives in nearby Dankie Township.

Recently two protests at Rhodes University came fast on the heels of the other: #fees must fall and against rape culture.

Says Zakede: 'During the fees must fall protests and the rape culture crisis workers provided solidarity to students to make sure that their demands were considered: these were national demands.'

He mourns the absence of a central leadership during the protests. 'We believe that every structure must have a way of dealing with its problems but we were not informed by any structure. There were no consultations. We saw that students were protesting against rape culture, and that the police were around. It was difficult to get to the student leadership. So we waited for the management and students to call us and tell us what is happening with the protests against the rape culture. It was difficult to intervene without information and also to contact the management'.

'Later when we asked the students to explain they said that a former leader of the Students Representative Council (SRC) had raped a fellow student and another case had also been reported to the police'.



Alfred Vena Zakede: At the forefront of building solidarity between workers and students at Rhodes University.

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However, some sections of the students were better organised like the South African Students Congress (Sasco). ‘Sasco demands were clear and monthly meetings were held with them. Sometimes the students are divided but we want their constituency to come to us. If they do so we can help them with some of the issues because we know how to handle them’.

DISCIPLINED UNION

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‘We sat as Nehawu and wrote a statement. Although not radical enough, the statement condemned

rape and gave solidarity to the students. It also condemned the vulgar language seen on some of the posters. Even Dr Mabizela’s car had some of these posters stuck to it by students.’

‘As Nehawu our aim is to protect everyone. We had an alliance with the students. We need each other and our solidarity is forever. However, the court interdict by management on 17 May that was later reviewed stressed students a lot. We are engaging management and trying our best to further engage with students. But we are against violence and loss of jobs as what happened at the University of Cape Town and in Johannesburg. If students are angry anything can happen. We insist that we want to know the leadership – protests have leaders and we want to engage the leaders to discuss rape. It is a

serious crime. Even as fathers in our families we are against rape and police must quickly act. The blood of students is young and their brains quick so they act fast. But as workers we are governed by the Labour Relations Act and we want a clear programme. What are the demands and how many have been won or lost?’

‘There are no labour brokers at Rhodes and there is no outsourcing. There is also a sexual harassment committee but we must continue to condemn the violations of other people’s rights. Listening to each other is important. We are for a better life for students including, improved facilities, affordable or no fees, security, unity, and no violence.’

The Nehawu branch at Rhodes University, which has just signed a recognition agreement, has 532 members. **LE**