

# Facing reality?

## *NEHAWU's policy conference*

**N**EHAWU's policy conference, which took place at the end of June, was also the occasion of the union's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Watching a union which was once regarded as an organisation that would never 'make it' go through the paces of such a conference was a rare treat. COSATU's public service arm has indeed come a long way.

Whilst some important issues were debated and the discussion document which guided a lot of the conference work was a rich political paper, some questions were left unanswered. The conference left the impression of an organisation trying to locate itself, globally, regionally and locally.

### **Weaknesses**

Organisation was not what it could have been. The conference would have been more fruitful had it been stretched over a longer period. There was precious little time for commissions. At some point all the unions will have to acknowledge that preparation is part of empowerment. Worker participation is not only about sending delegates to such an event. Policy discussions in the run-up to the meeting should have been extended.

Delegates found themselves wading through large piles of documents on the floor!

Despite these problems, discussions were rich and inputs varied.

### **Restructuring**

Around the world the public sector has either been restructured or is undergoing

*Phillip Dexter assesses NEHAWU's recent policy conference and lays down certain 'realities' which the union has yet to face.*

restructuring according to the neo-liberal orthodox paradigm: less government, a lean state machinery, privatisation, contracting out, commercialisation, less service of a poorer quality, an end to traditional job security.

South Africa has not been unaffected by this agenda. The transition from apartheid and the fact that mainly progressive forces are leading transformation in this country has, however, meant that many of these measures have either not been effected or have been less than successfully implemented. In this sense things are on hold for NEHAWU. It is not clear how long this will continue to be the case.

### **Debates**

Debates at the conference reflected this reality. Whilst the union analyses the role of public sector workers in classical Marxist terms, answers as to how to grapple with the problems were not always spelt out.

For example, the conference discussed contracting out - which is on the increase - without any strategies being finalised. Union

members seem to think that it will not happen and that when it becomes a real problem they will simply fight it.

The Strategic Policy Framework which was presented at the conference is refreshing, simply because it starts from a political position that is unashamedly Marxist, reflects a consistent bias towards the working class and attempts to grapple with the socialist project that the union has long been committed to.

The paper deals critically with the Tripartite Alliance and the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). Left critics of the union may smirk at its apparently orthodox findings: that the alliance should continue and the NDR remain the prime political responsibility of the working class.

The document does not, however, stop there. It embraces a notion of a socialist project and strong working class movement. Gender relations, the problems of senior citizens, disabled people and the youth all find a place in the union's vision.

### **Role of the state**

The conference afforded NEHAWU's membership the opportunity to debate the nature of the South African state. Whilst it is clear that this is a capitalist society with predominantly bourgeois institutions, NEHAWU asserts the need for organs such as unions and civics to form the basis for a workers' democracy. The state is then one tool for development and transformation, amongst many. This will entail transforming the state itself.

Lack of political will is the main factor inhibiting such transformation. The conference found both the ANC and SACP wanting in respect to issues facing workers and the working class more broadly.

Given the experience of the majority of NEHAWU's members at the hands of the previous regime, it is not surprising that the

union analyses the historical experience of black workers as sharply as it does. While the state is seen as central to transformation, the union recognises the dysfunctional machine that has been left to the majority by the former oppressors.

Thankfully, the union does not echo the call for abandoning the state that has begun to emerge more and more from some political quarters. Instead, it puts forward the need to transform the economy through the state and an ever more democratised private sector.

The union is very critical of GEAR and has committed itself to fighting for the reform of this policy.

### **Organisational issues**

The organisational section of the document is very frank. The realignment process that NEHAWU has undergone was, in many respects, driven by the logic of the formation of a single public sector union. While this had some benefits, it has led to some problems.

Structures have become more specialised, with workers being moved from one to another. This has inevitably resulted in some dislocation.

There is some irony in the unions deciding to release members to full-time positions in COSATU, but not being able to resolve the need for more officials to service the union in the regions. More and more personnel are needed to co-ordinate the ever increasing activities of the union movement.

### **September Commission**

The union has clearly benefited from research conducted by the September Commission. The conference adopted some of the commission's recommendations. Not all of the research is available and NEHAWU will need to deal with outstanding issues in the run-up to the COSATU congress.

## Negotiations

The conference also adopted a declaration on negotiations in the public service. Critically analysing the government-driven three year agreement for the public service, the controversial voluntary severance package programme, significant government roll-overs, and unfocused reform initiatives in the public service, the union took a hard line.

The small difference between government's position and that of

progressive unions on salaries gives much hope for a settlement. However, the fact that government could sign an agreement with the former whites-only, mostly reactionary staff associations and leave COSATU unions out in the cold does not auger well for the sector. As government comes to the end of its first term of office, pressure to be seen to have 'delivered' will sharpen the contradictions between it and the unions that have lent it their support.

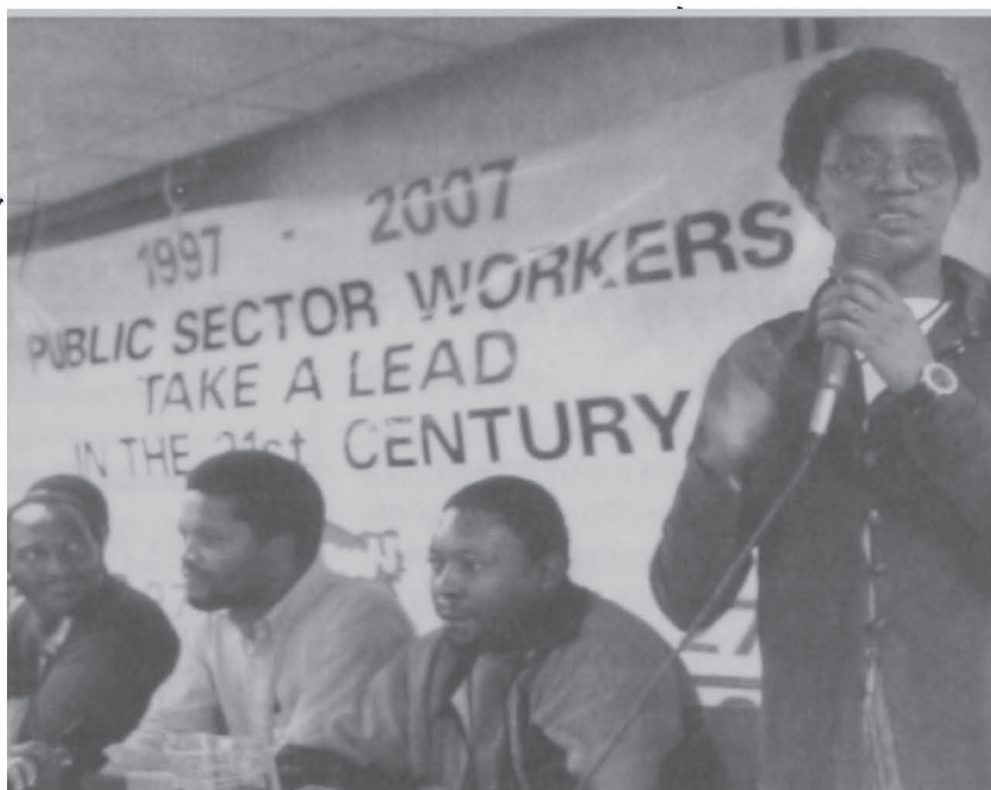
## Decisions

Decisions taken by the conference include:

- the need for a gender quota;
- a motion in favour of proper compensation for women who perform unpaid labour;
- support for increasing the social wage and making black economic empowerment about real delivery to the community.

## Realities

There are, however, still some harsh realities that the union will have to face.



*COSATU vice-president, Connie September, addresses the conference.*

The retreat of certain sections of the NLM from the philosophy behind the RDP has been embarrassingly quick. Socialism is talked about, but COSATU does not even have a collective investment strategy. This is an example of how the logic of the market is dictating practice in the movement.

The notion of a long haul to socialism and the ability to win reforms is often overlooked by the unions. As a result the struggle is romanticised.

In reality, we may well be facing a dirty, long, difficult, war of position where the issues of class struggle are constantly drowned in the sea of late imperialism. How will union membership react to this?

The real challenge in this transitional period may be simply to keep the struggle alive. In that case sobriety is in order. There was not a lot of that at the NEHAWU conference! ★

*Phillip Dexter is an ANC MP and a former General Secretary of NEHAWU.*