

In the public service

NEHAWU's official history was launched at the 10th anniversary celebrations of the union.

The progressive labour movement has a rich and bittersweet history. NEHAWU has done what all unions must do, record our history so that we are reminded of where we come from in order to go forward.

The book depicts the history of the union from the early 1980s to the present. It is very useful reading, especially for readers who are not familiar with public sector trade unionism. It is essential reading for NEHAWU members who want to know the history of their union.

Outline

The book is divided into different sections which deal with watershed periods in the history of the union.

The first section reads a bit like the constitution of the union. The scope, membership, constitutional structures and the branches of the union are set out. While this is a useful tool for members who are not familiar with union structures, this would have been better at the end of the book. Where it is, it distracts the reader from continuing. If it was at the end, it would allow the reader to take a journey from the past into the present.

History

The next five chapters deal with the historical development of NEHAWU and raise the watershed moments in the life of

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NEHAWU - the unfinished story.

the union.

Chapter 1 celebrates the organisational history of South African workers in general. The writers manage to condense 150 years into five pages, starting with the industrialisation of South Africa and the formation of workers' organisation. The chapter raises an interesting debate about the registration of trade unions during the 1980s. The position of NEHAWU's predecessors on this issue played an important role in the organisational development of the union.

The chapter would have been richer if it had properly explored the different perspectives on this issue, which contributed to the split into two trade union 'camps'.

This chapter also covers the manner in which the public sector was organised during the apartheid era. The importance of organising the public sector is raised and is closely tied in with NEHAWU's political perspective on the public sector. The union sees the public sector "... as a key area of struggle as organising workers could crack the apartheid state" (p 8).

The next chapter is devoted to the history of NEHAWU. The union was launched in 1987 after the merger between

the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), Health and Allied Workers' Union (HAWU) and the General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU).

SAAWU and GAWU emerged from a split in the Black Allied Workers' Union (BAWU), while HAWU was formed as the result of a decision by the National Federation of Workers to form industrial unions. All three unions had similar images. They were known as political, community or UDF aligned unions. They linked workplace struggles to the struggle against apartheid.

NEHAWU has maintained these links. At the end of the book, union president, Vusi Nhlapo, says that: "The biggest challenge facing NEHAWU is building further links with the communities it serves...public sector unions, by their very nature, must be community based unions. This is because they serve the public..." (p 88).

Chapter 3 deals with the merger between the unions in 1987. At that time NEHAWU had just 5 000 members. The only problem at this time was the Health Workers Union (HIWU) which did not come from the 'Congress' tradition.

The education sector of NEHAWU was boosted by the integration of TGWU membership at universities and technikons. Public service unions in the former 'homelands' also joined NEHAWU.

Strikes

Essentially Chapter 4 and 5 look at the way the union dealt with organisational issues such as "should health workers strike?" Key points in the union's history are the strikes



of 1990 and 1991 and the 1992 national strike.

These strikes provided the major catalyst for growth. Membership almost doubled in 1993 - from 24 000 to 44 058 and grew even further to 120 000 by 1995. The process of political change led to previously unorganised workers joining the union. A sense of settling scores with apartheid encouraged workers to take strike action. A good example of this is the 1990 strike in QwaQwa.

An important feature of the 1992 strike was the successful involvement of communities through community organisations.

An interesting issue that arose out of these strikes is the question of organising nurses. The union faced an uphill battle, caused by the nature of this profession.

While NEHAWU has made great strides in organising nurses (through employing a national nurses' organiser) and can today boast of 45 000 nurses as members, nurses continue to join other organisations. There is still no consensus within COSATU itself about which is the most appropriate organisation for nurses to join, as debate in the pages of the *Bulletin* has shown.

At work and home

A welcome feature of the book is that a whole chapter is dedicated to gender issues and how the union has taken these up. The writers have also attempted to integrate gender issues into the whole book. A number of women were interviewed to illustrate the role that they have played in the union. This is a refreshing break from the usual type of history, where men are the ones who relate their stories.

Sixty two percent of NEHAWU members are women, yet, until recently, the leadership of the union, like others in COSATU, was male dominated. Unlike other unions, NEHAWU took a very progressive step to remedy the situation. They adopted a quota system, which states that 50% of leadership positions at all levels of the union have to be occupied by women. While this has worked very effectively at branch level, it has not been implemented in national leadership. One hopes that NEHAWU sorts this out, and that they play a vital role at this year's COSATU Congress in getting other unions to follow their example.

Other areas where the union has promoted gender equality is the provision of child care at meetings.

NEHAWU is located in a sector where serious inroads can be made to promote gender equality. Issues such as promoting women's health issues and child care are two examples of change that can be brought about in the public sector - which will bring about change in society as a

whole.

An area that is not raised in the book is the union's plans for collective bargaining on gender issues.

Oral history

The book makes very good use of oral history. Workers and union officials who were and still are part of the union relate their stories.

While it is very refreshing to hear the voices of people on the ground, this method sometimes leads to problems. A lot of opinions are given, without any definite conclusions being reached on important issues.

Public service

Public services are services to the community. What happens in the public service will have an impact on the community.

While this is a recurrent theme in the book, it must be asked whether NEHAWU has appreciated this point sufficiently. The book does not deal adequately with privatisation and its implications for public service delivery.

This may well be a consequence of the tension between support for the ANC government and the ANC as employer. Government's macro-economic strategy, GEAR, with its emphasis on a lean state, can only intensify this tension. It will be interesting to see how NEHAWU deals with this question. ★

NEHAWU - the unfinished story - the history of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union 1987 - 1997, was produced for NEHAWU by Umanyano Media Service. Copies are available from the union for R30. Tel: (011) 337-8516/7/8/9.

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