

Massive pay rise for garage workers

Numsa's **Jenny Grice** points out that the big pay rise for petrol workers builds on a tradition in the metalworkers' union that has its roots in a 1980 living wage strike.

From 5 September this year, petrol attendants in small towns saw their wages almost double to R11.31 per hour. In cities their counterparts received a whopping 68% wage increase to bring them up to this rate. But the increase didn't fall out of nowhere.

Since the eight-week strike by motor workers (garage attendants) in 1998, Numsa (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) has worked hard to improve motor workers' wages. Strangely enough, it was auto workers who helped them. When Volkswagen (VW) workers went on one of the most significant strikes in South Africa in the Eastern Cape in 1980 they demanded a living wage of R2 an hour. This demand heralded the launch of the living wage campaign that Cosatu still conducts today. Little did these auto workers know their living wage demand would help petrol attendants almost 30 years later.

In 1980 South Africa was an apartheid state and international anti-apartheid groups targeted multinational companies to pay a living wage. This prompted auto employers such as VW and Mercedes Benz to approach the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) to calculate a figure that would represent a living wage. Every six months, researchers measured the

price of a basic basket of goods that they believed a family of five needed to survive on. This included basic food, basic clothing, transport costs and toiletries (including toothbrushes and panties that were needed in a year!). From this emerged the Household Subsistence Level (HSL) which was measured in rands.

In 1980 using the HSL method, VW workers drew up their own living wage which more realistically approximated to their needs (see box on opposite page).

When motor workers went on an eight-week living wage strike in 1998, petrol attendants joined in numbers. But on return to work, Numsa had "achieved little" for them according to then motor coordinator, Sam Tsiane. In negotiations however, agreement was reached to set up an industry policy forum to address outstanding issues.

It was to this body that Numsa took the issue of low petrol attendants' wages. Parties agreed to ask the University of Potchefstroom to design a living wage measure for petrol attendants. When the university demanded R2 million to do this, the project came unstuck. Instead parties turned to the old UPE (now Nelson Mandela University) HSL for guidance. After pricing a basket of

basic goods they found that petrol attendants' wages were way below the HSL. Parties then fixed a minimum wage target of R2 200 per month.

However, fuel retail employers claimed they were powerless to raise wages. "They told us that the department [Minerals and Energy] sets the petrol price and the profit margins," recalls Tsiane. "It was worker action in 2004 that put employers in a corner. During negotiations we organised pickets and demonstrations. Employers worried that a strike was looming."

In negotiations that followed, Numsa met then Minister of Minerals and Energy, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka in February 2005. She gave an in-principle agreement to raise petrol attendants' wages. Since then parties have worked on the practicalities of achieving this and the rest is history. (See opposite page "garage workers" rates old and new). LB

Jenny Grice is the Numsa publications officer – a version of this piece first appeared in "Numsa News" No 5, Sept 2007".