

Nehawu deals with internal crisis

*The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) – traditionally viewed as the largest public sector union – held its 7th national congress from 27 to 30 June 2004. The **Labour Bulletin** examines some of the underlying tensions against which the congress took place.*



Reports ahead of the congress highlighted some of the key socio-economic issues, which would dominate discussions. What the reports failed to reveal was the intense tension and political infighting amongst the leadership, which has plagued the union in recent years. It is these dynamics, which almost debilitated union structures across the country with members and officials being forced to side with different factions. Tension within the union came to a head when some of the union leadership including its general secretary Fikile (Slovo) Majola was suspended along with treasurer Lindelwa Dunjwa. Their suspension followed, what some in the union, believe was based on a secret investigation mandated by the union's president Vusi Nhlapo. They were suspended for a range of allegations including financial mismanagement. During the days of Slovo's suspension, one official says, the union was on the verge of collapse and everything

depended on whom you supported – whether it be Vusi or Slovo. The dynamics, he says, cut across all union structures. It was all consuming, divisive and debilitating. 'During the bad times the union was barely operating'. An independent hearing found them guilty of a minor charge and were subsequently reinstated.

These tensions led to the intervention of Cosatu who set up an independent commission in September 2002. The commission was established to investigate the operation of the union in four areas:

- union finances;
- the status of the union's president;
- organisational renewal; and
- unity/polarisation.

Following the commission findings, attempts were made to restore stability within the union and a ceasefire was declared between the union leadership. The national office bearers (NOBs) embarked on a campaign in all the regions to ensure that the factions begin to work together. The NOBs

informed the regions that tensions should desist and the constitutional processes must prevail. During this period various initiatives were embarked upon to resolve the union's financial position, which has improved following an increase in worker subscriptions from R20 to R40 a month.

However, in the build-up to the congress it became clear from the regions that there was a determined effort to remove the president and those who were associated with the investigation into the general secretary. The two positions being challenged at the congress were the president and first vice president Lula Mile (who had also been involved in the investigation and the drawing up of charges against Slovo). Ahead of congress it appeared that only one province out of seven had supported Nhlapo's nomination for president with two not finalised. There was also speculation that Nhlapo would go to parliament as some positions had opened up. He was ranked 142 on the



During the congress Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzina Vavi spoke openly about the problems facing the union. He highlighted the tensions and divisions that threatened the very existence of the union. 'we are emerging from a period where principles were threatened and objectivity and truth became a threat and an enemy.. We are emerging from a period where clearly wrong practices were condoned in the name of protecting each from another!' It is believed that Nhlapo was not re-elected.

ANC national list. The general secretary's position remained uncontested while indications were that the second vice president Nolutando Sibiyi was in the running for president as six provinces nominated her. Sibiyi, a nurse by training, was a worker leader in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. She had been part of the group supporting the reinstatement of the general secretary.

Aside from the election of new office bearers, congress was expected to deal with the restructuring of the public sector and government's decision to pursue the creation of a single public service through the incorporation of local government employees into the public service. In view of this, some resolution would have to be found on the building of one public sector union. The creation of one public sector union would entail the eventual merger of Nehawu and Samwu, an unlikely marriage at this point despite the fact that both unions have congress resolutions to this effect. Other issues

to be debated at congress include a review of the union's ten-year plan; a political discussion on the union's strategic positioning within Cosatu and the alliance; financial sustainability and the current round of wage negotiations in the public service.

Negotiations have got underway with government indicating that it could offer 4% while the Cosatu unions have demanded a real increase of 8%. There has been some speculation that because of the dynamics around Nehawu it might prove difficult for the union to yield the kind of influence it used to. In addition, it does not have the same level of resources devoted to the negotiations as was the case in the past when up to eight negotiators were deployed to the bargaining council. These factors could affect the union's ability to mobilise its members in the event of a deadlock. As one official says: 'we accept that we cannot seek to punch beyond our weight.'

In the aftermath of the congress, the union will need time to rebuild and re-

establish its profile. This will however, depend on whether the union emerges from the congress united or not. If united, it will be easier to rebuild the union and its profile. The union has lost some of its prestige, one unionist says, while there are numerous issues flowing from the divisions, which have to be resolved. The positive, it would appear, is that the NOBs are united in dealing with the existing problems. Aside from the issues raised an additional problem is the question of membership. The union has historically been considered one of the largest if not the largest public sector union with a membership of 234 000. However, it would appear that its membership is in fact somewhere between 170 000 and 190 000.