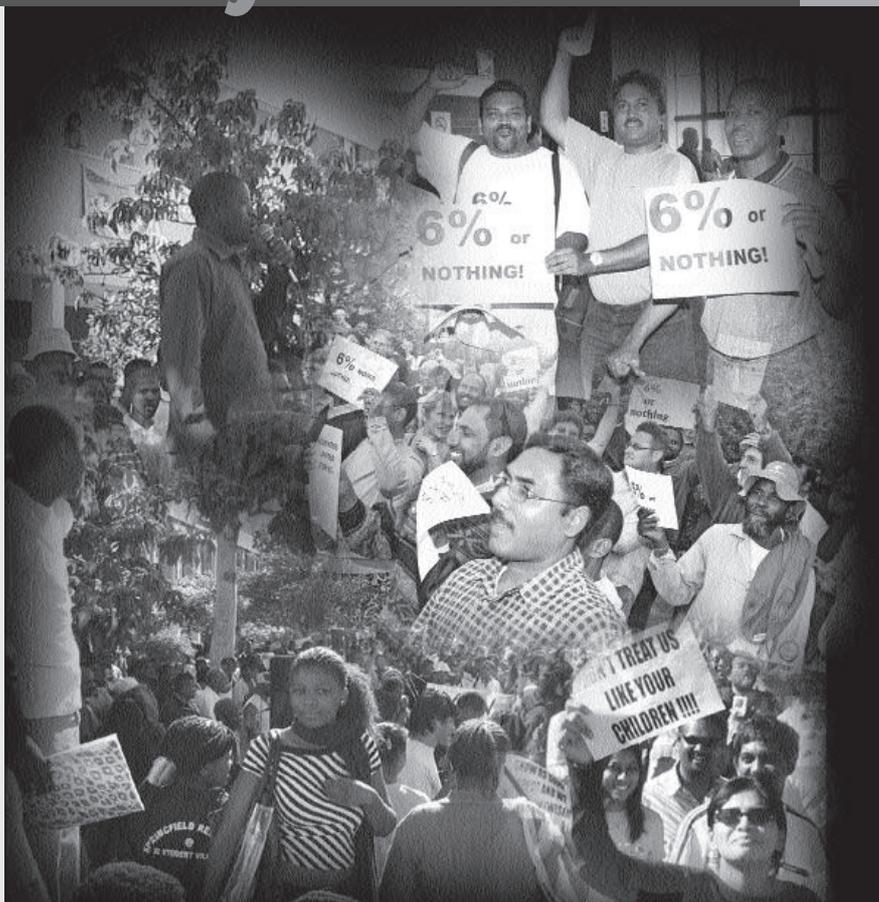


One for all and all for one until Monday

On 3 June thousands of University of KwaZulu-Natal staff – cleaners, professors and lecturers (with students in support) – went on strike and held demonstrations in support of demands for higher wages. **Fazel Khan** provides a personal account of the strike, which brought together, for a short time, four unions who had a history of division and conflict.



The strike began on a Friday and by the Monday it had run out of steam. But for that short period, the strike held, and staff overcame their differences. Their objective was a 6% pay and housing allowance increase for all staff, an increase in medical allowance from R300 to R400 and an extension of all scales by one notch, backdated to January.

But after being fired up on the Friday the strike petered out. The young alliance

of the four unions - University of Natal Staff Union (UNSU), National Educational Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), National Tertiary Education Staff Union (NTESU) and Combined Staff Association (COMSA) - strange bedfellows of different hues who had once been competing factions could not hold against the university's management. As the strike collapsed, accusations and counter accusations of selling out began as people argued over which union had accepted

management's lesser offer of 4% first. The fragile alliance, forged a few months back at an Imbizo, was on the brink of shattering.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Now it is all over we should take a look at the pitfalls that beset the strike. It was only two years ago that the four unions saw each other not as friends but foe. COMSA, representing staff at the former University of Durban-Westville on one



side, and three unions, NTESU, UNSU and Nehawu, represented staff at the former University of Natal on the other. As the merger of the universities approached in 2003, these opposing sides promoted their sectional interests and even backed different candidates for the vice-chancellor's post.

Of the four unions, COMSA has a history of militancy from the time it represented staff at the University of Durban-Westville (now Westville Campus). It produced unionists (and activists) of the likes of Ashwin Desai, Evan Mantzaris, and many others who have constantly fought for greater participation of workers in the management of the university and was at the forefront of campus action in 1996.

The three unions of the former Natal University (now called Howard College and other campuses) UNSU, Nehawu and NTESU have not been militant.

GETTING TOGETHER

The four unions held an Imbizo prior to the start of wage negotiations to develop a common bargaining position. They hammered out a nine-point plan that in essence called for a 9,5% salary increase for all staff backdated to January. At the initial Joint Bargaining Forum (JBF) university management presented a counter offer of 2,5%. All unions rejected this. In the subsequent negotiations the university increased its offer to 3,5% with a few benefits thrown in. A deadlock was reached

and the dispute was referred to the CCMA. At the CCMA, the unions compromised and demanded 6% backdated while management offered 4%. Some cracks appeared in the alliance as union executives haggled over the consequences of accepting managements' offer. However, after much argument they eventually rallied around their common position. With both parties failing to move, the CCMA process ended. The battle was on.

THE STRIKE

Matters dimaxed on 4 June as more than 2 000 staff from all four unions gathered for a 'Workers Rally' at the Westville campus quad demanding that management accede to their demands. Students at Westville campus also pledged their solidarity to the strike as speakers from the Socialist Students Movement and SASCO spoke from the podium. There was an expectant mood in the air. Many people were convinced that management would eventually succumb seeing the widespread support for the strike.

Management seemed to be seeing the light as they made a new offer, which merely constituted a repackaging of the existing offer by playing around with the implementation date.

The alliance broke down in the final stages of the strike as different unions emerged with their own offers. UNSU was actually the first union to capitulate. It proposed, contrary to the agreed position,

that it would be happy with 5% from April and R100 increase in medical aid and R560 once-off bonus per person. NTESU concurred with UNSU. COMSA's position remained unchanged; it still demanded 6% non-pensionable salary increase backdated from January 2005. However, in the end it accepted management's offer. For Nehawu, the complexities of the salary negotiations, at that stage, made it very difficult for the union to come up with a concrete position. With other unions shifting their positions, it did likewise. It first backed COMSA then supported UNSU at another stage and even came up with positions of its own.

CONCLUSION

Was preparation in the lead-up to the strike lacking? Were workers sufficiently mobilised? Perhaps class theory can come in handy to explain the lack of resolve that occurred. Is it not true that cleaners' and professors' interests could not coincide?

For the four university unions whose inherent differences divide them, there is really only one option left - they should push ahead with their earlier attempts to forge alliances, criticise themselves where necessary, but be united in their future dealings with management.

15

Khan is a postgraduate lecturer in the Social Policy Programme, School of Sociology and Social Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal.