

Police protest spills over

By ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

Dissatisfaction over working conditions has prompted black members of the police and prison services to take to the streets. On 23 January, hundreds of POPCRU members staged nationwide marches in support of their demands. Some of the demands are:

- The immediate reinstatement of all POPCRU members dismissed during the apartheid era.
 - The establishment of an interim promotions board to review all promotions.
 - An end to victimisation and harassment of POPCRU members.
 - "Visible" change in the prisons service.
- POPCRU also staged a sit-in at the South African Police Service (SAPS) regional offices in Braamfontein demanding clarity about the status of assistant police. These two actions, according to POPCRU president Enoch Nelani, were mandated by the union's national body.

Racism

In the week of the nationwide march, POPCRU members at local level embarked on action in support of demands to transfer white officers accused of being racist. On 27 January, about 100 black policemen and women at Orlando police station, Soweto, embarked on strike action after five officers they had accused of racism were cleared by a police inquiry into the allegations. The striking police demanded that the five officers be transferred. The strike turned ugly when the

Internal Stability Division (ISD) moved in to quell the strike. Members of the ISD opened fire on their striking colleagues, killing a Warrant Officer Xaba.

According to Nelani, the killing sparked off action by POPCRU members in other parts of the country. "We understand the frustration and anger of our members. Their expectations and needs are legitimate and have to be addressed immediately," he said. However, Nelani pointed out that POPCRU did not authorise these actions, nor did it support some of the methods members used to highlight their grievances.

Addressing workers' grievances

POPCRU, the SA Police Union (SAPU) and the Public Servants Association (PSA) met the new commissioner of police, General Fivaz, on 31 January to find a way of resolving labour disputes without resorting to armed intervention. Nelani said Fivaz had given a commitment that all grievances will be addressed immediately. The status of assistant police would be finalised within two weeks of the meeting, he said.

POPCRU has come under heavy criticism from some quarters for its actions, particularly police toyi-toying in uniform, the carrying of service guns on marches and the taking of hostages in some parts of the country.

Nelani argues that a uniform is like an overall that any worker wears at work. "You cannot expect workers to take off their overalls when they are going to a march." On the carrying of service guns in marches, Nelani conceded that this was a problem. "We don't support a situation where our members carry guns in marches. In some regions we managed to convince members not to bring guns to marches. However, we did not have success in other parts of the country."

Nelani said POPCRU does not condone the taking of hostages, whether they be black or white officers. "We are a union founded on the principle of respecting the civil rights of society in general as well as those of our members." He did not say whether POPCRU

briefing



Members of POPCRU march to Gauteng premier's offices

would take any action against members implicated in the incident.

Challenges ahead

Although POPCRU has been in existence since 1989, Nelani admits it has not devised an organising strategy. "We don't have a broad organising strategy other than an ad hoc situation. We have regional organisers who have been taking up issues that members raise." He added that, in January, POPCRU employed a national organiser who will set up an organising department and work out an organising strategy.

Trade union education for members is another priority. Nelani says POPCRU has appointed an education officer, but he has not yet assumed duties. "We have conducted a leadership course for branch chairpersons and members of the NEC. We are planning to run a similar course for shopstewards."

POPCRU faces a number of other challenging tasks. One of these is the need to draw in white policemen and women into its ranks. Nelani said white officers are joining SAPU and the PSA rather than POPCRU. "We are trying to devise ways of recruiting white members. But it is still difficult because they don't feel comfortable within POPCRU."

POPCRU members' latest demand, especially in Soweto, that white officers be transferred out of the township, will not help much in attracting them to POPCRU. There are reports that white and Indian officers have asked to be transferred out of Soweto as they no longer feel welcome by their black colleagues. Even at the funeral of officer Xaba in Soweto, no white officers were visible. This perhaps emphasises the point that racial tensions in the police and prison services remain high. ☆