

The public sector:

the contest for members

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briefing

As negotiations between the government and the public service unions and staff associations continue, new game rules are emerging.

Negotiations over salaries and working conditions are taking place in the Central Bargaining Chamber. This brings together government representatives and 19 unions and staff associations, which together represent all sections of the public service nationwide.

The players

The Public Servants Association (PSA), which claims a membership of 106 000, declared a dispute with the government, and announced a strike ballot. Although the PSA is seen as representing mostly white civil servants, its general manager, Casper van Rensburg claims only 40% of its membership is white.

The militant unions of the apartheid years, like NEHAWU and SADTU, seem to be wary of taking action against the new government. "We are negotiating with a democratic government, and not the National Party," they explain. "We must remember that there is a difference between the two."

The SA Health and Public Service Workers Union (SAHPSWU), according to its general secretary, Silas Baloyi, is the only militant union among the 19 employee organisations in the chamber. Baloyi claims that the latter day militants have become the new government's sweethearts. SAHPSWU was the only union in the chamber to embark on strike action.

Baloyi said SAHPSWU's major principle

is its non-alignment with the government. "When we recruit members, we make it clear to workers that we are not aligned with the government."

All these organisations are vying for the support of the 1,4 million workers employed by the state. Their main selling point is the 1994/95 salary increases.

Participants in the negotiating chamber agree that the large number of employee organisations make it an unwieldy structure. "It is difficult to put together a unanimous approach to the government," said one source. "Each organisation has its own mandate and agenda that they want to carry through."

None of the unions wants to be accused of having watched from the sidelines in the past, while others were engaging the apartheid government.

Baloyi explained why his union, formed in 1989, went on strike for the first time this year: "Public service workers were not covered by labour legislation until last year. Although we supported the demands of NEHAWU in the 1992 strike, we did not agree with their methods of embarking on illegal strikes that usually led to the dismissal of workers."

Van Rensburg said the PSA challenged the previous government to make the higher echelons of the public service representative of the country's population. "We said to the previous government in the 1980s that it is unacceptable to have top ranks of the public service dominated by whites. We told them to address this situation because one day there will be a majority government that will

want to change that."

Conflicting demands

Discord between employee organisations in the chamber has started to show. Although there appears to be unanimity about the demand for a minimum wage of R1 500, there is no agreement on how to achieve this. NEHAWU has proposed that it be phased in over a three-year period. SAHPSWU and the PSA want it implemented immediately.

The closing of the wage gap is another point of major disagreement. NEHAWU argues that a percentage increase must be on a sliding scale, with a cut-off point at R60 000 per annum. The PSA and SAHPSWU, on the other hand, demand a 15% across-the-board increase and oppose NEHAWU's proposal to freeze salary increases and benefits for senior public servants.

NEHAWU is not wedded to the demand for a 15% increase. "We are actually against the 15% increase demand," said NEHAWU's Vusi Nhlapo. "This is very little when you consider that the lowest paid worker earns about R900."

Strike action

Less than half of the PSA's membership voted in its strike ballot. Van Rensburg attributed this to administrative problems of posting ballots to members and getting them back. Eventually, the PSA withdrew its strike threat and agreed to participate in the task teams the government set up to investigate public sector workers' conditions.

SAHPSWU went ahead with strike action after balloting its members. Although officials had threatened a massive strike of its claimed 68 000 members, no more than 2 000 workers participated in the action. The strike was suspended after about four days.

Baloyi claimed that more than 6 000 workers participated in the strike. "We were sabotaged by the media," he said. "However, we have a 15-point plan of action and we

have utilised only one of those in the plan." NEHAWU, on the other hand, is determined to reach a negotiated settlement and avoid strike action. According to Nhlapo, his union has managed to win the support of former homeland staff associations. NEHAWU has condemned SAHPSWU for its "opportunistic" action and said the PSA had "hijacked" the demand for a minimum wage.

Nhlapo said his union's difference with the government is a matter of rands and cents. "We have already agreed on a wage

policy with the government. The government agrees with our viewpoint that there has to be a wage freeze at the higher echelons of the public service. There is also agreement that there has to be a new minimum wage for the lowest paid workers in the service."

NEHAWU and SADTU's reluctance to embark on strike action stems, perhaps, from our political situation. Neither wants to be associated with organisations that want to destabilise the new government.

Competing for support

Although SAHPSWU has been dismissed as "spoilers", their rhetoric might find a sympathetic hearing from some disgruntled NEHAWU members who feel their union is becoming "soft" on their demands. Clerical staff, from whom SAHPSWU draws most of its membership, could provide a hunting ground for the union. But it is questionable whether SAHPSWU can match its militant rhetoric with organisational abilities. If their flopped large-scale strike is anything to go by, SAHPSWU still has a lot of work to do. Organisation is not built on rhetoric alone.

Perhaps the current negotiations will decide who wins the battle for the loyalty and support of public sector workers. The numbers game is not the main issue. Public sector workers, divided along racial lines and skill levels, will choose an organisation that best represents both their immediate needs and their long-term aspirations.

