

# Public sector strike: Was it successful?

## Teachers and nurses reflect

The 2010 public sector strike left all sides unsatisfied. **Katherine Joynt** and **Mariane Tsoeu** spoke to nurses and teachers from Nehawu and Sadtu to get their feelings about the strike and whether it is a closed chapter or on-going battle.

**M**any nurses and teachers who were involved in the long and volatile 2010 public sector strike feel unappreciated, disillusioned and are preparing their CVs in the hope of greener pastures in the private sector or overseas. While the issues of wages and housing allowances are pressing, nurses and teachers in the public sector are also fed up with their working conditions, which include lack of resources to provide an efficient service to the public.

In addition, there are moral issues which fuelled the anger of poorly-paid teachers and nurses. These include the misuse of the public purse by those high up in government who buy luxury vehicles and World Cup tickets. The R110-million that ministers, deputy ministers, department officials and 'stakeholders' spent on World Cup tickets alone could have built 1 833 RDP (basic) houses.

Excluding added benefits, ministers earn up to 18 times more than the starter salaries of nurses and teachers before deductions. This vast gap between the salaries and benefits of different public servants exacerbated the anger of workers when they embarked on

their three-week strike between August and September last year.

According to nurses at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, Nehawu members (National Education Health & Allied Workers Union) are treated like 'second-class public servants' because they do not bring in revenue. Yet the public service is the essential link between government and service delivery and it is in government's best interests to keep public service workers happy if they are serious about service delivery.

The 2010 strike demands are largely an extension of the 2007 strike resolutions, which government has failed to act upon. These included government's failure to introduce an effective housing plan for public servants and its failure to fill much-needed posts in the public service. An estimated 80 000 vacancies exist in health care alone.

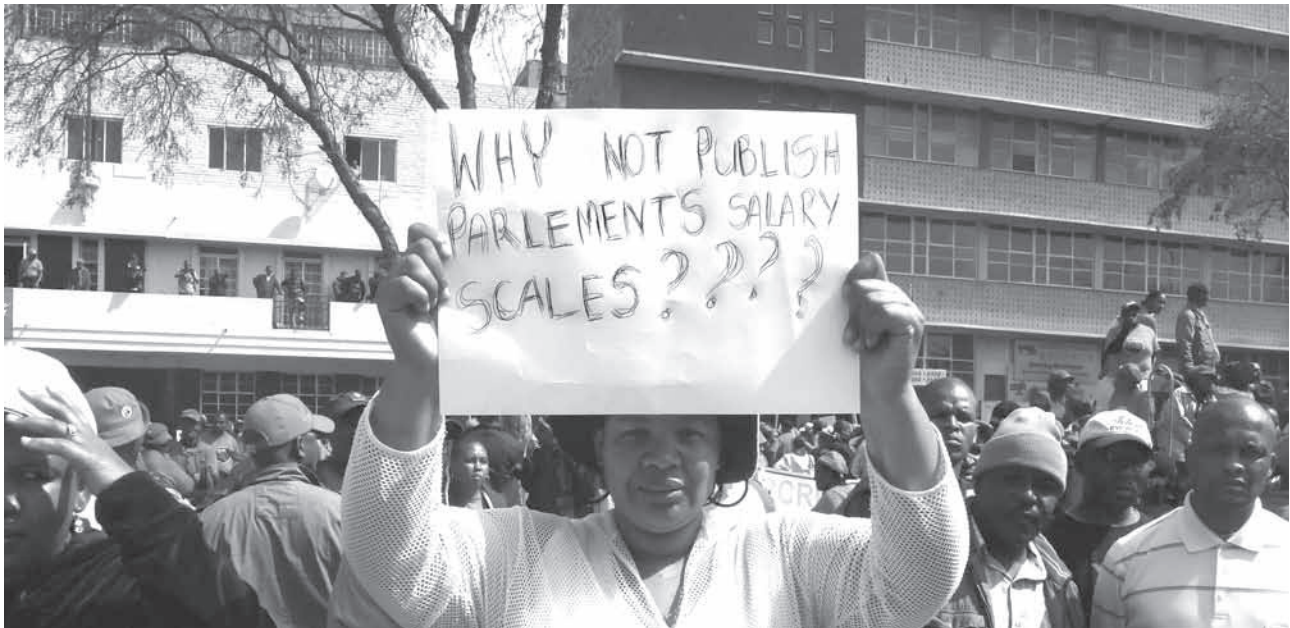
### TACTICS AND STRIKE FALL-OUT

One key motivator for the strike was the hope that the double digit wage increases, which workers at parastatals received before the World Cup, would assist public servants to achieve their demand of an 8.5% increase since they are paid out of the same public purse.

As Sizwe Pamla from Nehawu notes, the fact that Eskom, Transnet and other parastatals received these increases 'motivated our workers to take to the streets. We were the only sector demanding a one digit increase and we did not even get what we demanded.'

Nurses and teachers argued that unlike Eskom who threatened to strike during the World Cup, they decided to strike after the event. Teachers pointed out that Eskom was strategically positioned to threaten a strike because they could literally stop the World Cup: 'soccer matches cannot be played in the dark... tourists cannot visit in hotels without electricity... their niche lies in their power to make the world stop because of the sector they [work] in.'

Teachers who are members of Sadtu (South African Democratic Teachers Union), further noted that striking during the World Cup would not have had much impact because children were on holiday so there would be no interruption to school. They thought that their 'moment to strike was close to the exams when the employer would want to meet our demands because the matrics would do badly, but this is not what happened. Instead



pupils passed very well while we were out there striking for our rights.'

A feature of the strike was its volatility. Reports of violence, intimidation and neglected patients in hospitals caused public support to wane. However, the nurses and teachers we interviewed said that the violence and intimidation reported in the media was fabricated propaganda in which the media and government exaggerated isolated cases in order to 'paint a bad picture' of them.

According to nurses and teachers, their experience of the strike was that it was peaceful with the exception of state instigated violence. They recounted occasions when police opened fire on them without any warning while they were marching peacefully. They noted that 'colleagues were shot in the head and in the stomach...' and suffered severe wounds from rubber bullets.

According to Nehawu, workers' management of the strike was impressive because there were 250 000 angry members and it could have become uncontrollable. Nehawu made it clear that the union is against vandalism, violence and intimidation because the strike

was against the employer, not members of the public.

Nehawu's standpoint is that 'violence is not militant, it is criminal. As activists we have a right to persuade other people to join our struggle but we have no right to intimidate people. We encourage militancy but not violence.'

Government is in the process of implementing its 'no work no pay' principle by deducting money from the salaries of employees who went on strike. However, workers argue that government did not have a proper monitoring system in place during the strike. The state tried to monitor attendance by introducing registers which workers had to sign, but some registers never arrived because the basic education district offices were closed.

Angered at the payment deduction system, a teacher rhetorically asked 'are parliamentarians deducted monies when they do not deliver services to the people? Do they sign registers to prove that they came to work?' Nurses also feel that there are inconsistencies with the way government deals with public sector strikes because unlike now, no money was deducted during the 32-day strike in 2007.

One Nehawu shop steward sees government as adopting an apartheid government tactic of threatening dismissals and implementing 'no work no pay'. She recalled the longest public service strike in 1992 when workers lost houses and belongings because of deductions and dismissals.

There is also confusion about the implementation of the 'no work no pay' principle because workers in Gauteng have received no news of deductions, but there are rumours that in some provinces deductions have begun.

## SUCCESSSES

The 2010 public sector strike has been framed as a failure in which unions succumbed and workers were left disillusioned. However Nehawu maintains that the outcome of the strike was a victory. Workers received a 7.5% wage increase and housing allowances went up 60%, from R500 to R800. Nehawu believes that it was necessary to suspend the strike so that the working class and poor, particularly those awaiting treatment in hospitals, would not suffer the effects of the strike any longer.

There is a belief amongst Nehawu leadership and members that the strike made a statement to the employer and that next time the employer will manage negotiations better. According to a group of nurses at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital the strike was more of a success than failure because although the final settlement was disappointing, workers had united behind their demands and defended their right to bargain, which has set the stage for the next financial year.

However teachers who were interviewed believed that the strike was mainly a failure as they were unsuccessful in convincing the government to meet their demands. These teachers felt betrayed by unions like Nehawu because they 'settled for less' and prematurely suspended the strike.

#### GOVERNMENT AND UNION MISTAKES

The 2010 public sector strike was badly managed by the employer. Government was ill advised and their media statements were naive and provocative. Ironically, government's threats to sign without the unions on board, fire protesters and use security forces to intimidate workers only assisted unions in mobilising their members. In a rare moment, Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) affiliates and unions from other federations stood together against the employer.

Nehawu pointed out that before the union had even taken the decision to strike, workers who were angered by what government was saying had organised themselves. They came to Nehawu's head office and demanded that the union support their needs.

The new government under President Zuma in 2009 made many promises and promoted the ANC manifesto on decent work, but it did not live up to expectations. It was out of touch with the anger of workers.

Government also made the mistake of not signing a minimum service agreement in 2007 even though it was one of labour's demands. Signing such an agreement would have ensured that during the 2010 strike there was sufficient capacity to maintain essential services in the public sector.

Nurses interviewed indicated that government's bad attitude towards the strike will result in the loss of scarce and critical skills because many nurses and doctors feel that they are not treated with dignity and want to leave the public sector.

On the union's side some nurses believed that it was a mistake to wait until after the World Cup to strike because their needs may have been met if they had interrupted the Cup.

Nehawu has admitted that one of its mistakes lay with the mandating process and its level of communication with members. Instead of engaging directly with members on offers from the employer, leadership discussed the offer publically through the government and union press conferences. This meant that members had to engage with the media, which caused confusion.

For example, government proposed a scheme which would allow for members to access housing bonds but this offer, conveyed through the media, was overwhelmed by a focus on the figures for wage and housing allowance increases.

However Nehawu members we interviewed expressed that although there was some communication breakdown during the strike this has been rectified and trust in Nehawu had been regained when the new shop steward council was voted in.

#### FUTURE PLANS

The new financial year brings preparations for the next round of negotiations and potentially another strike in the public service.

According to the nurses that we spoke to, the only way for future industrial peace in the public sector is for the employer to meet their demands. Teachers are adamant that this year they will not compromise because last year the employer refused to compromise. 'What we are fighting for is the future, the learners we are teaching are going to be public servants too. We are doing this for their benefit and they have to do it for their future learners. The conflict of interest between the employer and the workers is eternal... we have to fight exploitation.'

Nehawu's Pamla notes that, 'A labour strike is very different to a revolution. You don't suspend a revolution. But you can suspend a strike because you live to strike another day. This year we won't be the ugly stepchild of the public sector family where everyone gets new toys and we get old ones. Our members are not paid enough money and this is the last time that we will be treated as second-class citizens. We demand consistency and fair remuneration.'

Teachers warned that future public sector strikes will only be peaceful if government stops sending police to shoot peaceful protesters. What is clear is that the tension during the 2010 strike has left teachers and nurses feeling bitter about government's arrogance and lack of appreciation for their contribution. Public servants feel that strikes are the only language that government understands and they intend to speak this language until government hears their demands loud and clear. **LB**

*Katherine Joynt and Mariane Tsoeu are independent labour researchers. They interviewed Nehawu's media officer Sizwe Pamla, four nurses from Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and two shop steward nurses and three Sadtu teachers from the Soweto branch.*