

# SADTU teachers *strike back*

On 15 May 1993, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) called for an indefinite teachers' strike, which was to begin nine days later. This was the first time in the history of South African education that a teachers' organisation had declared a formal labour dispute with the Department of National Education (DNE), resulting in the mobilisation of thousands of teachers for a national strike across ethnic departments of education. And perhaps, for the first time also, a teachers' organisation had assumed the centre-stage of the education struggle in our country.

SADTU's strike announcement, following closely on the widespread secondary students' actions against an increase in the matriculation examination fees, added a new dimension to the education struggle in our country. Its practical implications were that hundreds of thousands of students and their teachers were to engage in separate, but co-ordinated actions after the NECC's Education Summit, to bring a halt to formal education nationally.

Although the strike itself was averted through the personal intervention of ANC President, Nelson Mandela, and the subsequent negotiations between SADTU and the education authorities, the union has scored significant organisational, political and labour victories. But the strike call was not without its problems, particularly among black parents.

Likewise, the suspension of the strike by the

The national teachers strike was called off when the government agreed to negotiate teachers grievances and set up a national forum to address the education crisis. ISMAIL VADI\* argues that SADTU's mobilisation for the strike led to political and organisational breakthroughs.

union leadership after preliminary negotiations did not meet with a positive reaction from some SADTU regions and branches, particularly in the Western Cape and Soweto.

## **Strike ballot**

SADTU's decision to embark on strike action followed two prior developments.

The first was the sudden termination of salary negotiations between the public sector unions/teacher organisations and the relevant government departments through the direct intervention of President de Klerk. At a

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*Randall van der Heever, general secretary of SADTU*

*Photo: William Matlala*

meeting on 15 January 1993 in Pretoria, De Klerk was adamant that his government would offer a 5% salary increment to teachers and public sector workers as from 1 July 1993, and not a cent more! His pronouncement effectively strangled to death a tentative process of negotiations between the government and public/education sector representatives.

The second was the national strike ballot conducted by SADTU early in May this year. The result was that of the two-thirds of union members balloted, more than 90% favoured strike action to bring the education crisis to a head and to force the government to re-open negotiations over teacher salaries. Teacher exasperation, and their consequent willingness to embark on strike action, must be seen against the background of several earlier "department-specific" disputes, which had served to fuel their militancy.

### **Teacher grievances**

In April already, 29 000 Transkei teachers were on strike in protest against the unequal

salary packages for male and female teachers. They demanded parity back-pay for female teachers from 1 July 1991 to 30 June 1992 (which all other teachers have enjoyed over this period).

Similarly, early in May, 8 000 teachers in the Department of Education and Culture (Indian): House of Delegates were on "chalksdown" against the premature payment (while negotiations were continuing) of two teacher incentive schemes known as the "merit" and the "departmental specific" awards.

In the Department of Education and Culture (Coloured): House of Representatives, a protracted and intensive campaign against rationalisation and teacher retrenchments had been waged by several thousand teachers since October last year. What this struggle highlighted in particular was the attempt of apartheid education planners to restructure education unilaterally before any meaningful negotiations could begin over a future, post-apartheid system of education.

Finally, the non-recognition of SADTU by



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the education administrations in KwaZulu, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana and the all-white House of Assembly has generated insecurity and anger among SADTU teachers employed under these departments.

This is being perceived by SADTU members as political obstructionism by conservative politicians, as the union has already won formal recognition from the DNE, the Department of Education and Training (DET), the House of Delegates, the House of Representatives and the military government of Transkei (Recognition Agreements are to be concluded shortly with the education authorities of the remaining self-governing territories).

### Teacher demands

The above grievances in specific departments served as the backdrop to the growing dissatisfaction of teachers. However, the central focus of the strike call was the demand to re-open negotiations on teacher salaries and to stop teacher retrenchments. Teacher demands in relation to the strike therefore embraced both the specific and national

### SA Education Departments

There are 19 different education departments in SA - a result of the fragmenting effect of apartheid. The important ones referred to in this article are:

- The Department of National Education (DNE):** this is an umbrella co-ordinating body responsible for education training; salaries and conditions of employment; curricula and exams, etc.
- Department of Education and Training (DET):** responsible for African schooling outside the bantustans.
- Department of Education and Culture: House of Representatives (HOR):** responsible for coloured schooling.
- Department of Education and Culture: House of Delegates (HOD):** responsible for Indian schooling.

grievances.

- an end to unilateral restructuring of education;
- the re-opening of negotiations around salaries;
- a living wage for underpaid teachers;
- an end to rationalisation and retrenchment of teachers;
- collective bargaining rights for teachers;
- the right to organise and the recognition of SADTU in Bantustans such as KwaZulu, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana;
- parity back-pay for female educators in the Transkei; and,
- the reversal of the Merit and Specific Awards in the Department of Education and Culture (Indian): House of Delegates.

### Negotiations

As 80 000 teachers - one-third of the total teaching corps - were set to embark on a nation-wide strike, thereby threatening to plunge black education into a major crisis a few weeks before the mid-year examinations, Mandela took the initiative to open direct talks with De Klerk. Meanwhile, COSATU and its five public sector affiliates placed their "full weight" behind the teacher action.

After two days of intensive discussions the government agreed to the "establishment of an Education Forum .... before the end of June", which would "address the principle of examination fees .... the fundamental restructuring of education and all the problems relating to retrenchments". It acknowledged that the 5% salary increase is "inadequate and that there are special categories in the teaching profession as well as the civil service which merit sympathetic attention". It agreed also to re-open negotiations with the relevant parties to resolve other education disputes. At the same time the DET announced the suspension of the matric examination fees for this year.

While Mandela's intervention paved the way for renewed negotiations between SADTU and the DNE, the DET instituted a court interdict preventing SADTU and absurdly, 60 000 teachers under its employ,





from going on strike.

The SADTU negotiating team, caught between the conflicting pressures of Mandela's facilitation process, the DET court interdict and membership pressure to continue with the strike as planned, entered into preliminary discussions with the DNE on 21 May.

### Agreement

After an exhaustive nine hour meeting, an agreement was hammered out between the union and education authorities. In return for the indefinite suspension of the strike, the DNE agreed to the following:

- 1 Salary negotiations, which would be particularly focused on the lower categories of teachers, will be opened within four weeks of the agreement.
- 2 No new rationalisation programmes will be implemented, and teacher-pupil ratios and staff establishments will be referred to the National Education and Training Forum (NETF) for re-consideration (Facilitation Committee met on the same day to determine the composition, terms of reference and time-frame for the NETF).

- 3 The 'merit award system' will be reviewed in all education departments and the specific dispute in the House of Delegates will be subjected to third party mediation.

- 4 Sam de Beer, DET Minister, will meet with the education authorities in KwaZulu, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana to discuss SADTU's recognition.

- 5 A Technical Committee will be established to ensure parity back-pay for female teachers in Transkei.

- 6 Labour legislation for teachers, which will include the right to strike action by teachers, will be considered in parliament as a matter of urgency.

- 7 The DET also undertook to postpone its application for an interdict pending the final outcome of negotiations.

### Union gains

SADTU has hailed the agreement as a victory for "teacher trade unionism in South Africa". More significant is the fact that the union has strengthened its organisational capacity in the build-up to the strike. For the first time branch structures nationally have had to consult





members directly on the strike ballot question, leading to a heightened consciousness among teachers on issues such as teacher unionism, labour relations and strike activity. Teachers have finally come to appreciate the bargaining value of their collective power and the utility of the strike tactic.

This is evident from the sharp increase in union membership recently. SADTU's membership has risen by 20 000 in the last three months. The most impressive increase has been among coloured teachers in the Western Cape and the Transvaal. It is this shift in allegiance of coloured teachers to SADTU that in part explains the surprising announcement by the traditional United Teachers Associations of South Africa (UTASA) to organise a chalkingdown if the relevant education department did not back down on its retrenchment and rationalisation programme. This was after it had publicly distanced itself from SADTU's strike call.

The other area which has recorded a sizeable increase in membership has been Natal. In particular, several thousand KwaZulu Department of Education and Culture teachers

have joined SADTU, and have embarked on a wildcat strike to secure union recognition. This surge in membership, at least in the black urban areas of the province, has paved the way for greater non-racial interaction among teachers and a more politically assertive teacher presence in the region.

Finally, formally-retrenched white teachers, predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, who have secured temporary employment in some HOD ("Indian") schools have joined SADTU's Lenasia and Johannesburg branches. Although very small in number, their joining the union does reveal an interesting development – that given exposure to the actual processes of teacher unionism, South African white teachers are not as a matter of principle opposed to a teachers' union.

### Organisational problems

The teachers' strike call was not without its problems. Black parents in townships who have witnessed the repeated disruption of their children's schooling for almost two decades were naturally concerned about the prospect of a prolonged teachers' strike. More



fundamentally, their criticisms stemmed from the fact that there was little or no consultation with school-based parent and broader community structures.

They argued that they had simply heard of the strike through the media and that it was the union's responsibility to inform them of teacher campaigns and actions. However, as the processes of consultation unfolded in the few days before the strike, there was significant understanding of the teachers' cause and demands.

Only in one area, Phoenix in Durban, did parents express open hostility towards teachers who were already on a chalksdown by preventing them from entering school premises. The lesson to be learnt from this experience is that thorough discussion with parent/community/student structures is vital if any future strike is contemplated by SADTU.

The second difficulty sprang from the SADTU leadership's decision to suspend the strike even before it had begun. Members in several regions pointed to the lack of clarity in the agreement reached between SADTU and the government education departments around issues such as retrenchments and the salary package, and felt that the decision to suspend the strike was announced prematurely. In addition, they accused the leadership of signing the agreement and releasing media statements without prior consultation within union structures.

It is this dissatisfaction that in part explains the decisions of the SADTU Western Cape and Southern Transvaal regions to continue with preparations and campaigning for the strike until clarity was obtained in the course of further negotiations. The general public wrongly perceived this as acts of defiance by teachers on the ground against the union's leadership.

These tactical differences were resolved at a Special SADTU National Executive Committee meeting where all regions agreed to suspend the strike. SADTU is to review this position and the progress in negotiations over teachers' demands at its National Congress scheduled for early July. Even then the

SADTU Soweto branch was not convinced, and only after a week-long process of consultations with teachers, did it finally support the national position.

### **Political developments**

The teachers' strike developed as an explicit labour dispute in the context of delicate multi-party political negotiations. Liberation movements across the ideological spectrum expressed misgivings and concerns about the possibility of prolonged disruptions of formal schooling and the on-going erosion of the culture of learning and teaching. This is a political response that is understandable.

But it must also be noted that the student mass actions led by COSAS and the possibility of a national strike under SADTU's banner has forced the apartheid government to concede on a fundamental demand made at the Broederstroom Education Conference in March 1992 – the immediate establishment of a National Education and Training Forum to address crisis issues in education and to negotiate the transition to a post-apartheid education system. That the government has agreed to establish such a Forum by the end of June 1993, after stalling on the matter for over 15 months, is a major political victory for the democratic movement.

### **Conclusion**

This was SADTU's first attempt at organising a national strike of South African teachers. Mistakes have been made. At the same time important victories have been scored, leading to the empowerment of a sector that has long been subjected to intensely authoritarian and bureaucratic forms of control. That unquestioning subservience of teachers to education authorities has finally been broken. It is against this background that South Africa's only non-racial teachers' union stands poised to debate its affiliation to COSATU at its July Congress. ☆