

Struggle not over yet

An interview with Nehawu's Suraya Jawoodeen

When one talks to Suraya Jawoodeen, a picture that immediately emerges is one of a struggle for radical social change. In a recent interview **Elijah Chiwota** talked to her about her election to the senior position of National Education Health & Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) deputy general secretary and her new responsibilities and challenges

How did you join the trade union movement?

I became involved with the Nehawu in the early 90s at the University of the Western Cape where I was elected a shop steward in 1992. In 2000, I became iKapa Metropole regional secretary and in 2005 I was elected Western Cape provincial secretary.

In September 2010 I was elected Nehawu deputy general secretary for the next three years at the organisation's ninth congress. Coming in the wake of the public service strike, the congress identified the following as Nehawu's priorities in the next three years: the building of strong and vibrant branches and regions; a recruitment and registration campaign for new members; education and training; case handling and management; and collective bargaining.

What experience do you bring to this position?

The trade union movement is not like journalism, accounts, nursing or the teaching professions. It is not a career but a struggle to improve the living and working

conditions of the working class. Therefore elected leaders do not bring about change as individuals but they work as a team. In this sense we work collectively to bring about change as a union.

Our aim is to build a strong organisation with strong branches at the local level where our members are; we are also fighting for improved working conditions for our members; and to provide a quality service to the community in terms of better health and education services.

At the congress members told us that they wanted a better union – a fighting union that prioritised the struggle. The members' demands and the mood at the congress determined the leadership that was chosen.

What are your priorities as office bearers?

We are under pressure to deal with the members' mandate and as activists we are focusing on changing the union, the workplace and the role of the state. We see this as the correct task for a public service union that aims to transform the society that we live in.

The composition [of the national office bearers] we have is about change and continuity. Some office bearers have continued in their position whilst others are new. This translates to what the members demanded at the congress which was to reorient the union machinery in a way that takes us back to the shop floor so that we are close enough to hear what our members are saying.

Our first priority is to build strong branches and not to lose focus on other things. We also want to provide a better service to our members.

We want to build Nehawu on the ground, which was the mandate we were given at the congress. We were elected as a group to deal with that mandate and nothing else.

How will your election contribute to the advancement of women leadership in the union movement?

The union has a strong policy on gender and it supports the 50/50 quota. There was a period we did well, when we achieved parity and had many women in leadership

positions, but then we regressed. This was caused by an inconsistent application of the gender policy.

I was elected as an activist and I am not part of the gender quota. But I recognise quotas as an important tool for gender parity. From a role model perspective, the activism that we are building makes comrades put themselves forward when there are leadership positions.

Gender is important for the day-to-day activism and for highlighting the experiences of working-class women. But leadership should be understood as only one aspect of the struggle for gender equity. There are other issues that should be taken into account.

Gender is not simple and we need to continue finding spaces for women. Material conditions of the provinces and branches, raising consciousness of women in society and within the union should be taken into account when we talk of gender.

What is Nebawu's strategy post the 2010 public service strike?

In the Public Sector Bargaining Agreement (2007) we had an agreement with the employer which was not implemented. In this agreement we agreed that there were vacant posts in the public service that should be filled. But this has not been done. Wages have also been disputed.

Although we spend more on education and health, our outcomes are bad. Yet other countries are achieving better results with fewer resources. This shows us that there is a need to rethink on resources and what government does with the resources at its disposal.

We also need a turn-around plan for the public service that should include having quality jobs on all sites. As part of our struggle for better working conditions we strongly believe that the state can create better jobs by filling vacant



position in the public service.

In outsourcing there is a political connection with tenders that government puts out. The politicians are involved in tenders and yet service delivery remains bad. We are against all forms of labour brokering and tenders. A particular set of values need to be developed and ways must be found to stop obscene accumulation.

In our discussions as the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), we are pushing for a national health insurance as one of the ways to improve access to health care for workers. We need a different system that is based on the national health insurance [right to health care, social solidarity, universal coverage and a single public administration] and we do not support public health partnerships in the public health system because they are not benefitting workers. Public health partnerships are a travesty of justice because they negate workers' health care.

What moments in your involvement with the labour movement would you describe as a milestone?

In the trade union movement we see ourselves collectively as organised working-class fighters. There is no 'I' moment but 'we' moments. We promote the mass base by dealing with difficult situations that include the day-to-day challenges of our constituency in a difficult global crisis and an economic environment where there are no decent jobs.

We will continue to challenge the dominant capitalist policies and the general value systems. But the Alliance with the ruling party has its own challenges.

We need strong organisations that are able to defend alternatives against accumulation regimes. Ways must be found to stop the worsening living standards of our workers and the high unemployment. Workers are facing serious difficulties and that is why Cosatu is important for all of us. **LB**