

Teacher pay talks falter

By ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

Wage negotiations between teachers and employer representatives have reached a stalemate. When the Bargaining Unit of the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) met at the beginning of January, teachers' organisations walked out of the meeting soon after it started. They were dissatisfied that the state representatives lacked a mandate to go beyond the 1,4% increase offered in previous negotiation sessions.

Negotiations around salary increases and improved working conditions for teachers started in September last year.

The four teachers' organisations in the ELRC, the SA Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the white Teachers Federal Council, the coloured United Teachers Association of SA and the conservative, black National Association of Professional Teachers of SA have demanded an 18,4% increase on the total salary bill.

The teacher organisations instructed the state representatives to seek a clear mandate from their cabinet principals, saying they would not return until there was clarity on the state's offer.

Task group

In December last year the country's two deputy presidents, FW de Klerk and Thabo Mbeki, intervened in an attempt to break the

stalemate. They offered to set up a special task group of employer and employee representatives to investigate teachers' terms and conditions of service.

The task group would put forward a three-year plan for improvements, starting in April this year.

But SADTU general secretary Thulas Nxesi said his union is concerned that such an agreement would entail a three-year moratorium on labour action. "We are canvassing the views of our members before entering into a social contract with the state, as this will have serious implications for collective bargaining.

"The state will have to make a substantially improved wage offer if we are to give this proposal any serious consideration."



Thulas Nxesi, SADTU general secretary

SADTU demands

Nxesi said the four teachers organisations agree on the 18,4% increase, but differ on how it should be implemented. SADTU is demanding an across-the-board increase, which it believes will help address the salary disparities between black and white teachers. White and coloured teachers, on the other hand, favour a percentage increase.

Other SADTU demands include:

- An increase in the housing subsidy for teachers;
- Maternity leave for women teachers. At present, unmarried women teachers are not entitled to maternity leave, while married women teachers get limited unpaid maternity leave.
- Abolishing gender, racial and departmental disparities between teachers.

According to Nxesi, poor conditions had led

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to demotivation among teachers and many had left to join the corporate world. "The problems facing teachers have not changed because there is a new government. The same problems that teachers had under the

apartheid government are still with us today. For the past three to four years, teachers have only received increases of between five and seven percent," he said. ☆

What is the ELRC?

The Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) is a body formed in terms of the Education Labour Relations Act of 1993. Its main aim is to facilitate negotiations between teachers and their employers on salaries and general working conditions.

The council has equal representation from employer and employee organisations. The employers' side is made up of representatives from the white, Indian, coloured and African education departments of the apartheid era.

The council comprises the following teachers' organisations:

- Teachers Federal Council (TFC), for whites;
- United Teachers Association of SA (UTASA), for coloureds;
- National Association of Professional Teachers of SA (NAPTOSA) for black conservatives; and
- SA Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), a non-racial COSATU affiliate.

UTASA, NAPTOSA and the TFC have formed a multi-racial federation, a "new" NAPTOSA. According to SADTU's Thulas Nxesi, NAPTOSA's components maintain their regional and local segregated structures.

SADTU is unhappy with the Education Labour Relations Act (ELRA), under whose provisions the ELRC has been formed. Its objections include:

- It divides the workers further by placing teachers under a separate labour Act. "We want one LRA for all workers in the country," Nxesi said. He added that other teachers' organisations did not want to be lumped together with factory workers. "This played into the hands of the apartheid government, which was bent on keeping the workers of this country divided."
- The ELRA excludes certain categories of teachers — including those from private schools, tertiary institutions like universities and technikons — from its provisions. "This perpetuates divisions within the teaching profession, which we find unacceptable," said Nxesi. Some SADTU members fall into this category and are excluded from the collective bargaining process.
- Dispute resolution mechanisms in the Act are complicated and lengthy. SADTU argues that these will cause delays in the resolution of disputes and handling of grievances.

Nxesi said his union was invited to comment on the act before it was passed. "However, our participation was tokenism because the principles had already been agreed. The objections we raised were not taken into consideration."

SADTU is determined to campaign for one labour legislation for all workers in South Africa. However, the release of the Labour Relations Bill at the beginning of February will probably shift the emphasis away from this campaign. The draft bill covers teachers. According to SADTU assistant general secretary Mxolisi Nkosi, his union will now concentrate on commenting on the Bill in as far as it affects SADTU members.

FEATURE: NALEDI RESEARCH

NALEDI — the National Labour and Economic Development Institute — is a labour-oriented research institute which began operations about a year ago.

The following articles are based on longer research reports prepared by NALEDI researchers. Ranging from inflation to labour broking they indicate the breadth of work undertaken at the institute. All reports were prepared in response to union requests.

The labour movement faces the challenge of ensuring that working people are not disadvantaged as South Africa changes direction following the 1994 elections.

For instance, the recently released discussion document on the Labour Relations Act raises questions concerning the place of centralised bargaining and the role of unions in workplace forums. These issues are touched on in one of the articles in this section.

The public service is also required to play the important role of meeting peoples' needs. For this reason public service productivity is a key issue. This, too, has been the subject of NALEDI research.

The technicalities of inflation management and privatisation are also issues which need to be aired. The articles which follow on these subjects indicate that the labour movement has important contributions to make to both debates.

Jeremy Baskin
NALEDI Director

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