

# *Technikon troubles*

**T**echnikon Natal staff members took to the streets of Durban on 1 February to protest against management's wage 'offer' of 0%. The strike, which lasted four days, brought student registration and teaching activities to a standstill.

The workers are members of the National Union of Technikon Employees of South Africa (NUTESA) - a non-affiliated union which claims a membership of 650 out of a total workforce of 1 000.

Negotiations for the 1999 wage increases started in September last year. The union's chairperson at the Technikon, John Gardner, says there were signs of the trouble to come from the start: management was extremely reluctant to open negotiations and only agreed to come to the table after the Technikon Council intervened.

## **Demands**

The workers' demands include:

- an improvement in the current medical aid and housing packages;
- that management negotiate decent severance packages (the Technikon, like so many other tertiary education institutions, has been cutting back on staff in the past few years);
- a 17,5% increase across the board

Wages are at the top of the agenda. In the previous year's negotiations, the union pushed for, and won, staggered increases,

*by Deanne Collins*

---

which reduced the wage gap between the lowest and highest paid. This meant, however, that higher paid staff received increases well below inflation. Management's 'offer' will make the situation even worse. The union claims that wages at the Tech are below that paid at other institutions, including the nearby ML Sultan College, which also experienced industrial action last year. Including benefits, the lowest paid worker at Natal Technikon earns around R2 500 per month. A senior director gets approximately R12 500 per month.

Gardner says NUTESA is 'totally baffled that management can offer 0% and still say they are open to negotiations'. He says that management is basing its 'offer' on a 1999 budget that was drawn up without input from all interested parties. NUTESA is demanding that the budget be redrafted. Gardner questions whether the institution is as poverty stricken as management is claiming and suggests, instead, that administrative inefficiencies are at the heart of the problem. The union has issued an open challenge to management to debate this issue.

On 5 February staff members returned to their posts, after agreement was reached on the terms of reference for



pic: Jeeva Rajgopal

*NUTESA members voice their feelings, 3 February 1999.*

arbitration Gardner says the union is not entirely happy with this outcome: 'while NUTESA suggested arbitration as a way to take things forward, it means that one of the parties has to win...while we are confident that NUTESA will be the "winner" this could create problems in the future'. He is tightlipped on how far the union will move from its original demands, but points out that workers' attitudes have hardened as a result of management's calling out the riot police to move them away from the administrative building.

### **Two unions**

While NUTESA claims to organise across all occupational categories, its membership is concentrated in administrative and academic positions. It also enjoys an agency shop agreement - workers who do not belong to any union are obliged to pay fees to NUTESA.

COSATU affiliate, NEHAWU, which organises clerical and manual workers, is the minority union at the institution, with

approximately 120 members. It is not involved in the current dispute. According to Gardner, NEHAWU is conducting separate wage negotiations. Its members continued working through the NUTESA strike.

In 1997 NUTESA and NEHAWU members staged joint industrial action when wage negotiations deadlocked. The relationship has deteriorated since then, to the point where there is very little communication. Gardner attributes this to 'difficulties in agreeing on a common strategy' and political differences. The fact that NEHAWU still owes NUTESA money arising from legal advice taken during the 1997 strike has soured relations still further. Gardner also says that NUTESA finds it hard to work with NEHAWU because 'while we have local autonomy, everything NEHAWU does has to go through their regional office'. He says that this slows down negotiations. ★

---

*At the time the Bulletin went to press, NEHAWU was not available for comment (5 February 1999)*