

## *The union and politics*

**I** was born in 1956 in Newclare. I have two older sisters. My parents separated when I was barely a year old. We lived with my grandfather in Soweto. It was difficult because my mother had to do domestic work and my grandfather was ill. Nonetheless, we had a reasonably happy childhood.

I started school in 1963. I attended the Ncobe and Morris Isaacson secondary schools until 1976. The Soweto uprisings brought education to a halt. Then my mother lost her job. I could not complete my matric. My dream to become a lawyer was shattered. I still wonder how my life would have turned out if things were different.

### **Work**

Finding work so that I could further my studies proved difficult. My first job in 1981 was as a domestic worker, but the money was not enough. I applied to several institutions for bursaries, without success.

In 1984 I was employed at the Baragwanath Hospital (now the Chris Hani Hospital) as a ward attendant. I had failed to make the shortlist for trainee nurses because I didn't have a matric. I worked in the orthopaedic and general wards cleaning up, making beds and assisting the nurses. My starting salary was R183 a month. Although the working conditions were not that bad, the job was not

*Monica Sefese, shopsteward and vice-chairperson of the Sobala branch of HOSPERSA, speaks to Malcolm Ray and William Matlala.*

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challenging. But it was better than not having a job. I was desperate. I had children to take care of.

I eventually became a speech therapy assistant, which is the position I still occupy. Most of the therapists at Chris Hani Hospital are foreign and don't understand African languages. I interpret for them and the patients. I finally completed my matric last year. 'Better late than never' is my motto.

### **HOSPERSA**

I joined HOSPERSA in 1984 when it was a staff association. Until 1995, HOSPERSA was unrecognised and did not have collective bargaining rights. Despite this, it was a privilege to be a member of the association. My choice was straightforward as there were no other unions organised at the hospital at the time.

We are a non-racial union representing all categories of workers, from cleaners to management. We are affiliated to FEDUSA.

When NEHAWU was formed in 1987, signing up was not my obvious choice. I could identify with the problems facing



NEHAWU members, which were common to many of our members, but not with their methods and strategies. NEHAWU embarked on illegal strikes, which reminded me of the 1976 uprising. I did, however, support their goals. On the whole, HOSPERSA's method of reaching agreement by talking things through was far more appealing to me.

### **Recognition**

When HOSPERSA gained recognition and registered as a union under the new LRA, things changed. We were granted rights to bargain on behalf of our members, voice our grievances and needs, and elect union representatives in various departments.

My active involvement in union work began in 1995 when I was elected as a shopsteward. I assume workers saw me as a dedicated and outspoken person when it comes to worker rights and needs. The issues facing our union differ from the old days, when we were an association. Firstly, there are various unions organised at the hospital. NEHAWU and HOSPERSA are the

dominant unions. There is no difference in terms of the categories of workers we represent. We are therefore competing unions.

Secondly, we now have the power to enforce our rights as workers. Our philosophy is starting to change as a consequence. We now see industrial action as an integral part of the collective bargaining process. We recently had a demonstration, which is something new to us. We have to be careful how we exercise this power. We are cautious not to abuse our right to strike. The union has not changed its culture and methods.

The final challenge relates to my position as a shopsteward. I have to deal with union issues during working hours. This has a crippling effect on my work.

### **Transformation**

At a national level, the restructuring and transformation of the public service is firmly on the agenda. While HOSPERSA supports transformation and has a policy on affirmative action, there are some in our ranks who are not particularly happy with what is happening. We are affected by downsizing and restructuring in different ways to NEHAWU. Many of our members have either resigned or gone on pension. NEHAWU, on the other hand, faces the threat of retrenchments at the lower staffing levels. Our position on affirmative action is that people who occupy positions which carry responsibilities should have suitable experience and qualifications. While we recognise that there are barriers to transformation the process should be gradual.

### **Unity**

Our relationship with NEHAWU is not as ugly as one might expect. We have come a

long way since the 1992 NEHAWU strike. Our members felt threatened by NEHAWU. We were worried about possible victimisation and had ethical problems with workers striking in an essential service like hospitals.

There are still deep reservations among our members about collaborating with NEHAWU. Workers are sometimes at loggerheads with each other over wages and conditions. On a positive note, we have managed to forge unity at shopsteward level. We remain separate organisations, but there are issues which have brought us closer together.

Our embracing of industrial action has also been a source of unity. We always try to avoid a strike, but will resort to it if we have no option. Workers are realising that it is the government, as employer, that must accept responsibility for strike action. In this regard, HOSPERSA, like NEHAWU, is adopting a rights-based approach to collective bargaining.

In principle, we support unity in action. At the end of the day we are workers with common needs and aspirations.

## Merger

An organised merger is a possibility. Today, there are more commonalities than differences between our organisations. We operate in the same labour relations environment and negotiate in a single bargaining forum.

But there are still things that need to be ironed out. We disagree on a whole range of issues. Our strategies are still very different. We have a more conservative membership. NEHAWU is also in alliance (through COSATU) with the ANC and SACP. FEDUSA is strongly opposed to political alliances. I feel strongly that, at the workplace, we are workers first. When you bring politics into the union, issues cease to be worker issues. They become

political issues and are potential sources of division.

I'm not implying that workers should keep out of politics. Politics is the prerogative of individuals. It should be kept out of the workplace.

There is an argument that being aligned to the ANC is positive, because the government is our employer. My response is that this is a conflict of interests. I am comfortable in a non-aligned union fighting workers' issues. This is the feeling of our members.

If we overcome these differences, there is no reason to remain separate organisations. In the meantime, we see joint action around common problems and challenges as a basis for unity.

## Gender

I am also the provincial gender representative. It is a new position and I am still coming to grips with the issues. I have noticed that the gender question raises eyebrows in the union. Most of the members of HOSPERSA are women. Gender equality is therefore very real to us. Some of the challenges are the under-representation of women in the union, equal pay for equal work and affirmative action. I see this as part of the broader transformation process in the public service.

The three positions I occupy in the union can be taxing on my home life. If management allowed shopstewards time off to do union work, the balance between work, the union and the family could be better managed. The burden on women shopstewards would be lessened. I am a single mother. Fortunately, my children are older and are able to take care of themselves. It is still very demanding, but challenging. I will continue doing union work until it ceases to be a challenge." ★