

Unions and government square up

*Negotiations between eight public service unions and government got underway in June. The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to **Public Servants Associations** head **Anton Louwrens** about the process.*

Labour Bulletin: How have negotiations in the public service evolved?

Anton Louwrens: Prior to 1994, for all practical purposes there was no question of collective bargaining in the public service. In recent years, there has been a consolidation of collective bargaining and a maturing in terms of demands by unions. The collective bargaining structure established in the public service forced a range of unions with diverse approaches and ideologies, to work together.

Over the years this has been achieved with the three driving forces in collective bargaining now being the Cosatu affiliates – Nehawu and Sadtu and the PSA, a Fedusa affiliate. The unions in the labour caucus have begun to work closer together and we now thrash out our differences before confronting the employer. The dynamics between the Cosatu and Fedusa affiliated unions have changed because we have all realised that we are serving the same purpose of protecting the rights of our members. At the end of the day we sit together in the bargaining council and we fight for our members – it is not a question of ideology.

Labour Bulletin: What is your

approach to collective bargaining in the public service?

Anton Louwrens: We have sought to adopt a co-determination type of approach where we as a union can engage the employer in a calm atmosphere not only around collective bargaining issues but issues of management. This has however, not materialised.

Labour Bulletin: Is there any attempt to deal with the potential of a skills shortage in the public service with all the claims that skills are being lost to the private sector?

Anton Louwrens: The public service sector education and training authority (Pseta) is not functioning effectively (see p34). It is not only a question of funding but the fact that the CEO has been a government official in the office of the minister for public service and administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi. Does this not raise issues of corporate governance? The current acting CEO is also government's chief negotiator in the wage negotiations. The Pseta is not funded in the same way private sector Setas are funded. Government departments do not pay over the 1% levy but rather they are required to provide for an equivalent of 1% for training in their budgets. This does not

mean that 1% is handed over or ever used.

Labour Bulletin: Can you provide a brief outline of the current round of wage negotiations?

Anton Louwrens: A three-year wage deal ended this year resulting in the start of discussions at the beginning of June with formal negotiations starting on 21 June which co-incides with Fraser-Moleketi's budget speech in parliament. The employer tabled its initial offer in the public service co-ordinating bargaining council (PSCBC) of a 4.4% increase. Other employer demands include the introduction of a framework for the determination and compensation for scarce skills; various task teams to investigate changes to pension, medical aid and housing; pay progression for health workers and a review of allowances. The way the budget has been drafted now, it is difficult to ascertain the amount set aside for increases, but it would appear that an amount equivalent to 7.5% as a total cost to employer has been included in the budget. The unions' demands include a 8% real wage increase during this financial year and issues around pay progression, medical aid, housing, allowance and various adjustment to the different leave provisions. 18