

# NEHAWU's congress

## *building a transformative union*

**N**EHAWU held its historic 6<sup>th</sup> national congress from 26 to 29 April 2001. The congress tackled challenges facing the South African labour movement in general and the public service in particular.

### **Challenges facing NEHAWU**

NEHAWU, as the biggest public sector union in South Africa, is expected to play a significant role in transforming the public service. The ability of the public service to meet its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) objectives depends on the content and speed of transformation.

The primary objective of this transformation is to make the public service responsive to the needs of all South Africans. This is particularly the case for blacks, the working class, rural communities and vulnerable social groups. This is a decisive break from the old public service, which was geared towards serving only the interests of a few. The transformation of the public service takes place at a time of declining social expenditure and increasing need for services.

Another challenge is to respond to the rising 'new managerialism' and the neo-liberal restructuring of the public sector. The logic of new managerialism often results in privatisation, outsourcing and retrenchments. This means the reduction of the public service in terms of size and capacity

*Moloantoa Molaba looks at some of the discussions and resolutions adopted at NEHAWU's 6<sup>th</sup> national congress.*

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NEHAWU is also faced with the task of building a transformative union with the ability to service its members, deepen worker control and generate policy alternatives.

### **The environment**

The congress noted that the size, shape and type of public service we build is largely determined by the type of state we have. The ANC-led alliance has always shared the broad thrust and objectives of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and the orientation of the National Democratic State (NDS). The congress concluded that the central task facing the NDR is to overcome the legacy of national oppression of the black majority in general and Africans in particular.

This understanding, translated into public sector or government departmental programmes, means all programmes must seek to meet the social needs of South Africans, particularly the working class and rural communities. The choices

departments have to make when faced with difficulties should be resolved in favour of this central objective.

The congress adopted a Strategic Policy Framework document. This document rejects the notion of a neutral state that balances the conflicting class interests of different stakeholders

The proponents of a neutral state unconsciously support the entrenchment of the current property relations and consolidation of deracialised capitalism. Neutral state proponents say the state must only create and regulate an environment for economic growth and conditions for foreign direct investment.

This means the state has no business in direct productive economic activities. It must create a flexible labour market and an army of workers without rights. The state must outsource or privatise social services to encourage new private investments and the co-modification of basic social services. The result is a lean state with no capacity to deliver services to the working class and rural communities.

In the context of advancing the NDR and building an NDS, NEHAWU believes:

- The NDS is a project of the working class and its allies.
- There can be no fundamental social transformation of society and the public service if the remnants of apartheid and the neo-liberal forces are allowed to influence the NDS.
- The task of building and consolidating the NDS, as well as defending its role in economic development, is the responsibility of all revolutionaries

NEHAWU will

- Fight every attempt by forces seeking to defend apartheid privileges and neo-liberal advisors wanting to shape the democratic state into a shell without transformative capacity.

- Work with all revolutionary cadres deployed towards the deepening of transformation, especially in realising the effective delivery of social services and ensuring the economic development of the working class and the rural poor.
- Fight for the speeding up of transformation of the state, particularly institutions responsible for the delivery of education, health care and welfare.

### Campaigns

In the next few months and years the union will embark on different campaigns and struggles. The union will continue to fight against:

- wage restraint and poverty wages;
- privatisation and cuts in public employment;
- unsafe and unhealthy working conditions;
- the weakening of the LRA, BCEA, and the exclusion of the public service from UIF;
- racism, sexism and corruption in the workplace.

NEHAWU will defend and expand the public sector, particularly in health, education, welfare and other public services. This includes:

- the struggle for adequate levels of funding to reverse the under-funding and to meet the needs of the public service workers and their communities;
- developing social and economic policies and strategies to counter privatisation and the new managerialism in the public sector;
- promoting a culture of participation in the delivery of social services

NEHAWU will build transformative unionism in the public sector to strengthen the progressive traditions of trade unionism in South Africa. It involves:

- striving for a non-racial, non-sexist unity



of public sector workers through mergers, beginning with the COSATU unions, and then other public sector unions as a step towards creating one giant worker federation in our country;

- linking organised worker struggles with those of the communities through broad-based alliances.

### **New managerialism**

Since 1996 we have seen the reduction of the public service by over 170 000 employees and declining social expenditure (this year's budget was somewhat more in favour of increased social expenditure). The reduction in the size of the public service is largely due to a conscious Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) policy decision to contain personnel expenditure. So as natural attrition takes place, posts are not filled

The result is that some provincial departments and hospitals are faced with massive backlogs, low staff moral, overworked staff, long unmanageable queues and the lack of capacity to spend.

Management's key response to this reality has been the rise of the new managerialism thesis. It is the equivalent of the ideological concept of a 'minimalist state'. The government's restructuring strategy has been influenced by the new managerialism thesis.

This thesis stipulates that the state must be small, highly trained and very focused on its core business. In the context of a hospital, core business is health care (in its narrow clinical sense). Cleaning, security and kitchens are not core business. Resources and management time must be directed towards core business. Any non-core business must be outsourced or privatised even if it leads to retrenchments. This thesis attributes the existence of non-core business as

contributing towards management incapacity, wastage, inefficiency and spiralling personnel costs. The non-core business hinders the public service from fulfilling its core functions.

### **Transformation of the public service**

A transformative public sector union, like NEHAWU, is a strategic ally of the political leadership of the ANC in the state. Every effort should be put into building the type of partnership that will further the cause of the revolution. NEHAWU noted with pride and a deep sense of responsibility that it is placed at the heart of the state machinery. Its conduct can either advance or undermine the revolution.

It is the dual responsibility of both the democratic state and a transformative public sector union to improve the working conditions of workers and ensure the optimal delivery of social services to communities.

### **Building socialism**

Socialism still remains a fundamental task of all progressive mass organisations of the working class. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the world socialist system has not in any way questioned the validity of the struggle for socialism. The congress reaffirmed the leading role of the South African Communist Party (SACP) in building socialism in South Africa.

The current extremes of capitalism, like the increasing co-modification of social services, has strengthened the union's belief that the objectives of the NDR cannot be fully accomplished under capitalism.

The struggle to transform the public service has reinforced what NEHAWU has always believed.

- NDR objectives are not incompatible with the task of building the elements, capacity and momentum of socialism.



*NEHAWU wants to build a transformative union to service its members*

- ❑ Socialism is the only just, rational and sustainable future for the people of our country and humanity at large.
- ❑ The discussion and debates on the meaning of building socialism in the current phase of the NDR cannot be confined to the SACP and COSATU, but must be extended to the broader ANC-led movement.

The building of socialism in the present context depends on

- ❑ a strong and powerful party of the working class that is rooted in the masses and their struggles and the SACP is this party;
- ❑ the potential of the mass-based popular movements, including trade unions, to push struggles beyond the profit-making logic of capitalism;
- ❑ the growing hegemony of socialist and radical democratic ideas within our broader society and internationally;
- ❑ a strong and democratic state that is

allied to the progressive forces,

- ❑ the national and international balance of forces

The SACP must be strengthened organisationally so that it can provide ideological and political leadership in the struggle for socialism. The trade union movement has a significant role to play in educating the workers and their communities about socialism. It also has to craft ways of building socialism in the present period. Some of the key tasks facing the labour movement in building socialism are:

- ❑ continuing to build a strong transformative unionism in our society;
- ❑ defending the public sector against privatisation and downsizing;
- ❑ pressing the demands for an adequate social wage;
- ❑ contributing to the diversification of ownership patterns through cooperatives and other forms of social capital,



- ❑ deepening participatory democracy in the workplaces, communities and broader society;
- ❑ the convening by the SACP of a conference of like-minded socialist forces whose objective should be to revive the international socialist movement.

### The tripartite alliance

The congress reasserted the long-held view that the ANC plays a leading role in the alliance. The congress also asserted that leadership is not something imposed from above. It is earned through struggles for transformation, engagement with its partners and mobilisation to win the confidence of the masses. The ANC remains the only organisation that has the interests of the majority of the people in the country at heart. The ANC and its alliance partners can address the needs of the working class.

The congress also reasserted its commitment to the values and goals of the Freedom Charter and RDP, which remain at the centre of the alliance.

The congress further resolved to continue supporting the SACP and ANC through:

- ❑ mobilising the union's structures for a strong SACP by continuing with the debit order campaign and establishing SACP units in the workplace;
- ❑ mobilising the union's structures behind a strong ANC by workers and all NEHAWU shopstewards and officials participating in all ANC structures;
- ❑ having joint political education programmes;
- ❑ intervening strategically in political and ideological struggles to strengthen working class leadership and hegemony.

### Building a public service cartel

The congress resolved that the unity of public sector workers remains a central

objective of NEHAWU. The congress believes that a merger with SAMWU will lay a firm basis for the formation of a public sector cartel. (The SAMWU congress resolved to merge with NEHAWU.) COSATU's principle of 'one industry, one union' should be speedily implemented as more new unions from the public sector join the federation.

The congress further resolved to initiate the formation of the cartel by calling for a COSATU public sector unions' summit before the end of the year. This summit will lay the foundation for mergers.

### Investing in development

The congress reaffirmed the view that union investments are geared towards generating more resources for the union. This will allow the union to:

- ❑ improve members' benefits;
- ❑ achieve self-sufficiency;
- ❑ contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of the workers and their communities;
- ❑ build social capital, such as community-owned enterprises, cooperatives and other developmental projects;
- ❑ further the strategic objectives of NEHAWU, the broader trade union movement and the working class, in building a working class-owned and controlled economy;
- ❑ use the investment company to engage in the transformation and restructuring of the current economy.

COSATU should lead discussions on how progressive unions can make union investments meet the above objectives while operating within a hostile capitalist environment. ★

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