

# Editorial

The struggle by workers and their unions for healthier working conditions has been overshadowed by the urgent need to negotiate even the most basic of rights for their membership, such as the right to a living wage, and to address "bread and butter" issues such as overtime, dismissals, unfair labour practice and retrenchment procedures. This is despite the appalling conditions in many workplaces and the high toll this exacts on the health of workers.

Recently, however, COSATU and NACTU have recognised the importance of this area "in principle". Both have initiated discussion around health and safety and some affiliates have begun to translate these ideas into action. One form of action has been health and safety campaigns. This edition (the first of two *Critical Health* editions dealing with "workers' health") carries an article on one particular campaign - *The NUTW's Brown Lung Campaign*. The article illustrates the need for structures to take health and safety campaigns and struggles further. Much debate is currently taking place around the form that such structures should take. In the article, *Union Struggles for Health and Safety*, Dirk Hartford and Frank Meintjies, both activists in COSATU for a number of years, address this debate. They look at current trends in union thinking and suggest alternate ways of ensuring that health and safety assumes its rightful place on the agenda of the union movement.

An issue that unions in the public sector in particular have targeted in their campaigns are the potential dangers of privatisation for their membership. In his address at the opening of Parliament early this year, FW de Klerk reiterated his government's commitment to privatisation. In the health sector, privatisation has extremely serious consequences and ultimately undermines the progressive movement's struggle for a national health service. An increasing number of people on medical aid schemes will strengthen the private sector and yet with the escalating fees in the public health sector (aimed at pressurising patients into the private sector) as well as the deterioration in health care delivery in the public hospitals, more and more workers are demanding such benefits. A number of unions have seen the potential problems involved but recognise, as valid, the need of their members for decent health care. In the article, *Health - who can afford it?*, Hartford and Meintjies examine these problems and the ways in which certain unions are responding.

In addition to the dissatisfaction with the kind of services provided, workers have very negative experiences of the way in which they are treated by health professionals in general. Lesley London, from FAWU's Ray Alexander Clinic, provides valuable insights into workers' perceptions of doctors in particular, and suggests more positive ways in which they could interact with workers.

The Industrial Health Research Group's clinic for workers in Cape Town has tried to address some of the problems mentioned above. The objectives of the clinic as well as the kind of service it provides are outlined in an article that also raises other areas where workers' needs are not met by the existing health services.

Negotiations around health and safety are increasingly requiring an understanding of available information concerning the work environment and its effect on workers. An article on *Understanding Accident Statistics* shows how a knowledge of statistics can help workers identify dangerous industries and assist workers in negotiating for a safer workplace. Jean Leger and Ian Macun advise readers on where to find the official accident statistics and demonstrate how these statistics are often misleading.

Also provided in this edition are the names and addresses of organisations that can assist unions with information needed in the struggle for health and safety as well as a list of topics dealing with health and safety that have been covered by other publications. A list of abbreviations used in this edition is provided on the back cover.

Two recent strikes by hospital workers in Cape Town and Johannesburg have ended in major victories for the workers. The course of the strikes as well as the significant gains won by the workers are reported on in the last two articles of this edition.

