

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HEALTH WORKER STRUGGLES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The first available historical record of involvement of blacks in nursing dates back to the time period 1685-1825. In the 18th century, nursing involved private work without the strict regimentation, rigid supervision of labour and intense supervision as we have it today in modern hospitals. Colonial settlers in the Cape used male slaves for nursing duties.

The development of capitalism made for far-reaching changes in the health sector. It affected the distribution of health services, the position of health workers, the division of labour in the health service. Health services, as far as the labour process was concerned, became organised along the lines of a factory. In addition, technological development changed the position and the skill requirements of health workers. The need arose for a trained, skilled and stable labour force of nurses.

- 1891 South African nurses were able to achieve professional status in the Cape Province.
- 1913 South African Trained Nurses' Association (SATNA) was formed. The original aims were to promote the professional interests of nurses and to suppress the practice of nursing by unqualified persons.
- 1925 South Africa's first medical council was formed and nurses were represented by two delegates.
- 1940's Only few black nurses were trained. The reasons were poor schooling and widespread discrimination against black nurses enrolling for nursing courses.
- 1942 The General Workers' Union held a series of meetings in Johannesburg hospital to discuss organising nurses into a trade union. The South African Trained Nurses' Association

- opposed unionisation. When the union was about to be formed and the launch was planned, SATNA began a nationwide membership drive and campaign to enlist the support of parliamentarians and other influential people for a Nursing Act that would make unionisation of nurses impossible. A draft Bill was made for a nurses' association with compulsory membership, denying nurses the freedom of association. This Bill passed as Act 45 of 1944.
- 1944
1949 Student nurses at Victoria Hospital in Lovedale went on strike in support of a colleague who was unfairly suspended, apparently because she had taken part in a petition complaining about aspects of the hospital. After the parents intervened and made representation on behalf of the nurses to the Hospital Board, the nurses went back to work. Later that year, another crisis occurred at the hospital when nurses refused to attend certain religious meetings. Eventually the Superintendent had the hospital closed as a training hospital for nurses.
- 1958 The government ordered that all nurses required pass-book numbers in order to register for nursing or to do further courses in their training. The Federation of South African Women and the ANC's Women's League opposed pass-books for women, and organised a public protest campaign. Over 200 women attended a protest meeting inside Baragwanath Hospital.
- 1959 The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) started a Hospital Worker's Union and began organising in Durban and Cape Town.
- 1960 Health workers at Karl Brenner Hospital in Stellenbosch went on strike for better wages and working conditions. White nurses supported the black unskilled hospital workers who were striking.
- 1961 A strike was organised by the Hospital Workers' Union at King George TB Hospital in Durban in protest against an incidence of corpor-

al punishment of nurses by a matron. Skilled and unskilled workers supported the demands that the matron be fired. They furthermore demanded equal eating facilities, proper food, the establishment of an employment insurance fund and an end to racial discrimination in the hospital service. Over 300 hospital workers participated in the two week strike. As the police cordoned off the hospital, the strikers were supported with food from the local community. The strike also received international support. Some of the demands of the workers were met, others ignored. 21 workers were fired.

1961 A hospital superintendent was fired after releasing details of the number of deaths and casualties in the Sharpeville massacre. Community health workers in the area supported the superintendent.

1973 Student midwives at Zulu McCord's Hospital went on strike for higher salaries. They were earning less than R40 per month at the time.

1980 Hospital worker's organisations were formed in Natal, the Transvaal, and the Cape. They aim to break down barriers between health workers by bringing them together in one organisation. These organisations accept all hospital workers as members, regardless of their skills and level of training.

1980 Hospital workers in Cape Town asked the General Workers' Union to assist them in organising themselves so that they can raise problems and grievances with the authorities. The Union soon achieved majority membership in many hospitals and representative workers' committees were established in these hospitals.

1981 37 radiographers left Baragwanath Hospital in protest against unequal and poor training and salaries. Community members and trade unions pledged their support.

1982 Nurses opposed forced segregation into separate homeland nursing associations, and white nurses' domination of the organisation.

- 1982 400 workers at Hillbrow Hospital went on strike for better pay and working conditions. Striking workers included cooks, cleaners, clerks, and typists. An elected committee met with hospital authorities and presented the demands of the workers to the Superintendent. The workers' demands were not met.
- 1984 800 Groote Schuur Hospital workers in Cape Town went on strike.
- 1985 Over 1000 workers at Durban's major hospitals went on strike for 7 days, mainly for higher wages. A workers' committee negotiated a settlement with the Provincial Administration in which a 20% wage increase was laid down.
- 1985 Baragwanath Hospital crisis: Student nurses' negotiations with authorities on grievances broke down after intimidation of nurses by security guards and police. Nurses dismissed, then (all except one) re-instated after successful court interdict. At the same time, 718 non-classified workers went on strike, mainly for higher wages. All arrested, then released, dismissed, re-instated after successful court order. Nurses' grievances are in the process of being met; non-classified workers received small increments.