

THE GENERAL AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION (GAWU): ORGANISING HOSPITAL WORKERS IN THE TRANSVAAL

Health workers' unions in South Africa are still relatively young, and as yet there is no overall national structure to unite all unionised health workers. In the Transvaal, it is mainly the General and Allied Workers' Union who, together with the Health Workers' Association (HWA) organise health workers - that is, nurses and non-classified hospital staff. In Natal, this work is done by the Health and Allied Workers' Union (HAWU), an affiliate of the National Federation of Workers (NFW). Hospital workers in Western Cape hospitals are organised by the Cape Town-based Health Workers' Society and the General Workers' Union.



Critical Health spoke to Samson Ndou, president of GAWU, about the work the union is doing in the field of health worker organisation. He gave the following description of the history, the membership, the organisational structures, the difficulties and the future plans of the union.

History of the union

(GAWU) was formed in May 1980. As a general union, GAWU's aim was to organise all workers who had not been organised at that time. The union suffered a set-back when, at the end of 1981, the government clamped down on it. Several of GAWU's organisers and spokespersons were arrested. It was only in May 1982 that they were released.

Organising health workers

Membership

In 1983, GAWU organisers started unionising health workers hospitals and clinics, mainly around Johannesburg/Soweto, and on the East and West Rand. At present, GAWU has members in the following hospitals:

- Sanatorium Hospital (West Rand)
- Millsite Hospital (West Rand)
- Leratong Hospital (West Rand)
- Rietfontein Hospital
- Baragwanath Hospital (Soweto)
- J.G. Strydom Hospital (Johannesburg)
- Hillbrow Hospital (Johannesburg)
- Other private hospitals and clinics

When GAWU officials talk about health workers in their union, they mean non-classified hospital staff and nurses. Most of the health worker members of GAWU are women; and most of these are non-classified hospital employees, mainly cleaners.

In Baragwanath Hospital, GAWU has over 800 members. Almost all the non-classified workers at Rietfontein Hospital are members of GAWU. And at Sanatorium Hospital, GAWU claims majority membership.

Union Structures

GAWU's organiser for the health sector is Boy Nethavhani. Once workers' committees have been formed, one shop steward is elected from each hospital. At Baragwanath Hospital, this was changed recently. Now GAWU members working at Baragwanath elect a representative from each department (e.g. the cleaning, kitchen, and laundry departments). The number of representatives from any one department depends on how large the membership is in that department. The representatives from each department then have joint meetings.

For their Baragwanath branch, GAWU holds a weekly meeting, to which all workers are invited. This, however, does not as yet happen at any of the other hospitals. Also, there are no regular joint meetings of workers from all the hospitals where GAWU has organised. Such meetings would be very important if there is to be unity amongst health workers; for GAWU's president, Mr Samson Ndou, believes that the differences between workers of the various departments will be bridged once they are unionised.

Uniting health workers: Plans for a national union

GAWU has taken part in the move to unite unions under the new union federation (COSATU). In order to find better ways of working together and to cut out any competition, COSATU has started a policy of organising one union in each industry. Many unions organising within one and the same industry will join to form one union under this policy. And the general unions (of which GAWU is one) will make its members in the various industries join the relevant COSATU union which has been appointed for that industry. There are similar plans for the health workers' unions around the country. Health workers' unions are preparing to form a national union of health workers by the end of this year.

Difficulties in organising health workers

Samson Ndou talks about the difficulties of organising and representing health workers. He gives the following reasons for this problem:

"Unlike other workers, hospital workers cannot go on strike, and do not have access to industrial courts as is the case with other workers. The reason for this is that these workers are said to be working within the so-called 'essential services', and therefore it is considered a crime for workers to take part in any labour action such as strikes etc. for whatever reason.

"As a result of this, hospital workers have been faced with terrible conditions which they have been unable to do anything about. To give you an example of what happens, I only have to mention things such as poor salaries, no grievance procedures, bad working conditions, irregular increments etc."

GAWU and the health authorities

These problems show that the union has to take on a very hard-handed employer. Until now, the union has only managed to represent workers on an individual basis. Sanatorium Hospital is the only hospital where GAWU has come to an informal agreement with management. GAWU has asked for a recognition agreement with management at Rietfontein Hospital. The matter was referred to the Department of Health; and the official response was that workers were not allowed to join a union. At the moment, this question is being investigated by GAWU's lawyers.

Problems of representing workers

But even to represent workers on an individual basis causes problems. With any grievance, the union has to write to the superintendent, who then refers the matter to the health authorities.

The health authorities, in turn, are not known for taking speedy and appropriate action. During the Baragwanth Hospital crisis, for example, GAWU requested a meeting with the superintendent, but never got a reply. The union then approached the Director of Health Services of the Transvaal - again no reply. Union officials then sent a telex to the Minister of Health, and again to the Director of Health Services. From the Director, there was no reply. The Minister of Health replied by referring the union to the Medical Executive Council (MEC). The union took the advice and approached the MEC - but again without getting any reply.



Bara Workers discuss the strike

Baragwanath: "Back to square one"

Samson Ndou describes the situation of Baragwanath Hospital workers after the strike as "back to square one". Some time after the strike, workers did get small wage increments which were backdated to 1 November. However, their wages, working conditions, employment conditions, and pensions remain poor. Also, the discriminatory and divisive pay categories, employment conditions and differential benefits have not changed to bring about more equality for the workers.



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