

# Public sector unions u



FOR millions of workers in the public sector, the rights that workers have under the Labour Relations Act (LRA) are still a dream.

Because besides farm and domestic workers, who have no protection in the law at all, public sector workers are the worst off in the country.

Only a few public sector companies, like SASOL, ESCOM and the municipalities, are covered by the LRA. The vast majority of public sector workers have their own special laws regulating labour relations. Although in some instances — like SATS and the Post Office — these have been slightly improved recently, they are still much worse than conditions under the LRA. What public sector labour regulations have in common is:

- All industrial action (strikes, stoppages, go downs, blacking etc) is illegal and is regarded as sabotage if workers take action.

- A majority of black workers are classified as temporary and can be dismissed at any time on 24 hour notice.
- All workers are employed by the state where there is a high degree of centralisation

and co-ordination to undermine progressive unions.

- There are many job categories which are used to promote division and racism.

- Wages are fixed according to the budget requirements of the government and they are often simply imposed — the unions are only there to be "consulted".

- Racist structures are still firmly entrenched and this is made worse by:

- The high proportion of white workers (almost 50 percent in SATS and 60 percent in the Post Office).

- Attempts by the state to decrease the numbers of black workers and increase the number of white workers.

- Racially-based worker organisations which collaborate with the bosses against black workers.

- Racial discrimination in pay and conditions and terrible racist practices in the workplace.

Faced with these great problems, as well as massive attacks through privatisation and wage freezes (see other stories on this page), progressive public sector unions have begun meeting to try and work out a joint strategy for struggle in the public sector.

The major unions organising the public sector are SARHWU (SATS), POTWA (Post Office), NEHAWU (health and education institutions) and SAMWU (municipalities). Other unions, like CWIU (Sasol), NUMSA (Escom, Icor, Alusaf) and NUM (Escom), also organise some public companies. But these companies generally are covered by most of the provisions of the LRA.

The repressive conditions and primitive labour relations in the public sector make sustaining organisation very difficult. All subcommittees, for example, in SAR-HWU and NEHAWU have to be collected by hand.

Organisers are not allowed any access to the workplace. Negotiation and recognition is refused as a matter of principle, no matter how many workers have been organised. Racist practices, like separate toilets and canteens, are taken for granted.

The established negotiating forums in SATS and the Post Office are limited to one delegate from each union in the sector, no matter what its size. And the bosses have an equal number of delegates.

The chairman, who is from the camp of the bosses, decides almost everything. Representation on the Council has, in the case of SATS, to be agreed upon by 75 percent of the "Labour Council". The progressive unions have refused to join these structures because they are so undemocratic.

Public sector workers have fought bitter struggles against these conditions and for a living wage. Last year there were massive strikes in SATS, the Post Office and many hospitals. Thousands of workers were organised during and after these victorious strikes.

This year the wage freeze and conditions of employment are the major issues around which workers are organising. The struggle against the backward "Labour Bills" in the public sector seem to be linked with COSATU's struggle against the Labour Bill in the private sector. The struggle against the wage freeze and privatisation need to be an essential part of COSATU's living wage campaign.

Public sector workers are entering to fight the attacks in the public sector. They need the maximum solidarity from, and unity with, other COSATU workers.



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WAGES in the public sector are very bad. In the Post Office the minimum wage is R375 per month, in SATS R380 per month and in the health sector wages are as low as R160 per month.

But Bobo's government clearly think public sector workers are carrying enough. Bobo has said there will be a wage freeze in the public sector this year.

This means that there will be no wage increase at all — even though prices are now going up by about 15 percent each year.

Every year public sector workers have been getting poorer and poorer because the small wage increases are much less than the increase in prices for the things that we need. Now with the wage freeze Bobo seems determined to drive public sector workers into even greater poverty.

Bobo is doing this because the bosses have been demanding it from him for a long time. And now he is turning round to the bosses and saying that they must do the same in their factories,