

## BARAGWANATH HOSPITAL STRIKE 1985

### Divided interests and joint action

The deep divisions between health workers in general are also to be found amongst people working at Baragwanath Hospital. Nevertheless, the strike did bring about some joint action and can be seen as one step forward in uniting workers.

The nurses' part in the hospital strike was well monitored and received much attention. They could consult among each other easily, as they were all staying in the residence. Many of them kept diaries of the events. The workers, in contrast, were dispersed; many of them have not learnt how to read or write; and the union had difficulty in co-ordinating their strike.

At the beginning of the strike, the nurses' and the workers' issues were quite unrelated. Some of the grievances of the nurses were directed at the privileges that higher categories of hospital staff were getting. Nurses were demanding, among other things, to be able to use hospital transport for purposes not directly related to their work; recognition of their SRC; better quality food for nurses and an equalisation of salaries among nurses. So initially, the nurses' grievances did not match up with the workers' grievances. It was only once the workers took action, that the nurses included some of the demands of the workers into their own demands, for instance the poor pay of workers, the demand to re-instate the dismissed workers, and the demand not to be forced to act as scabs in the place of the striking workers.

Secondly, there were clashes between nurses and security staff. But even within the security staff itself, there are different categories. Members of the security staff were offered higher wages if they volunteered to undergo

special security drills or paramilitary training. Those who underwent this training now make up the hospital's special security force. In this position, they are divided from the rest of the security staff and from the other hospital staff. It was these security men who beat up the nurses - an incident in which six nurses were injured. When the nurses, for fear of intimidation, refused to send a delegation to the superintendent, some nurses were harassed by security guards. A TPA vehicle with Bara special security men carrying batons was parked outside the nurses' home.

Officials of the General and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU) and of the Health Workers' Association (HWA) decided to address workers and nurses separately, according to COSATU's policy of organising workers along industrial lines; for different categories of workers would use different organisational strategies.

But in all the meetings, report-backs were given on what had happened to other categories of hospital employees. In order to make joint demands and exert joint pressure on the hospital authorities, both nurses and workers were represented by one and the same legal team. Along with an interdict to prevent the nurses from being evicted, the lawyers applied for the re-instatement of workers. For both workers and nurses, this legal action was successful. All striking nurses and workers except one were re-instated.

## **Events leading up to the nurses' action**

The nurses at Baragwanath Hospital had repeatedly voiced their grievances to the matrons - and repeatedly the matrons refused to address those grievances. The first response from the Chief Matron came on the third day of the crisis: She read out a letter from the Deputy threatening to dismiss the nurses.

### Intimidation and harassment

That same day, a group of nurses met with the Superintendent. The meeting was to be continued the next day.

The nurses felt intimidated by the police who, by that time, had made their presence felt. They therefore asked the Superintendent to come to the nurses' residence to continue the negotiations there. But he refused to come. Instead, he demanded that the nurses should send a delegation; the rest of the nurses were to go back to work or otherwise hand in their uniforms and collect their pay-cheques. The nurses did not send a delegation, as some of them had been harassed by security. They locked themselves in the residence for fear of more harassment. Subsequently, the Superintendent arrived with five policemen and cameras. The nurses were told to go to work within 30 minutes, or face dismissal. Security guards tried to arrest some of the nurses, but were not successful. At that stage, negotiations broke down.

### No 'strike' of nurses

The nurses' action cannot, in the strict sense, be called a 'strike'. They attended all meetings in full uniform. In that way, they showed that they were prepared to go to work. In fact, the night nurses did go on duty. It was only on Saturday, four days after the outbreak of the crisis, that nurses stopped working - after they were told by the Superintendent that they should not work in the wards because they would not be legally covered. Two days later, the Superintendent announced that all nurses were dismissed and had 24 hours to vacate the residence.

A subsequent court interdict ruled that the nurses (except one, whose court decision is still pending) were to be re-instated and not to be evicted from the nurses' residence.

### Aftermath

After the re-instatement of the nurses, most of their short-term demands were met. Among other things, they are now allowed to attend HWA meetings without fear of victimisation. But some long-term grievances still remain.



## Events leading up to the workers' action

The non-classified workers at Baragwanath Hospital had long-standing grievances which had not been addressed by the authorities for a period of almost two years.

In March 1984, the non-classified staff did not get wage increases along with other hospital employees. By March 1985, they still had not received an increase. In September/October 1985, finally, they were told by the authorities that there was no money, but that the final decision on wages was to be announced by the end of October. But the end of October came, and the workers still had not seen any increase. At a meeting with the authorities, they voiced their anger. The authorities replied by announcing another meeting for 13 November. At that meeting, workers were again told that there was no money, and that they would be considered for an increase in March 1986. After another meeting on the following day had brought no satisfactory solution to the workers, they decided to go on strike. The police was called in and the workers were arrested, and later forced at gunpoint to collect their pay-cheques.

## Subsequent events

What followed was a series of meetings convened by HWA and GAWU, and banning orders on some of those meetings, and further police intimidation and harassment.

GAWU's written applications to the various health authorities did not get any reply.

During the course of the strike, a smear pamphlet discrediting GAWU was distributed at Baragwanath, Hillbrow, and Natalspruit hospitals, issued in the name of BHAWUSA (the Black Health and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa). BHAWUSA dissociated itself from this pamphlet, which was presumably issued by the security police.



Bara workers discuss the strike

## Baragwanath Workers' Resolution

passed 16 November 1985 at a meeting convened by GAWU

WE THE WORKERS OF BARAGWANATH, AS REPRESENTED BY GAWU,  
NOTING:

1. That the task of health workers is important, and vital to community service
2. That no wage increment has been given since 1983, and that this wage increase has only been suggested for 1986
3. That management has constantly refused to negotiate with workers or their representatives with regard to their grievances
4. That white employers have assaulted our fellow colleagues
5. That management has chosen to make use of military and police personnel to intervene in this dispute
6. That health workers work under general poor conditions and unfair labour practices
7. That the present condition of hospital patients is rapidly deteriorating as a result of the action of the management!

### THEREFORE RESOLVE:

1. That the blame for this crisis must be placed squarely at the door of the management and not the workers
2. That management begins immediate negotiations with workers and their representatives over wage and working conditions
3. That police and military personnel are withdrawn immediately
4. That assaults on our colleagues are stopped
5. That our fellow comrades are unconditionally released from the prisons of apartheid
6. That we call upon the assistance and solidarity of all progressive organisations here or abroad, be they political, cultural, women, workers' or civic organisations.