

OTHER STRIKES AT OTHER HOSPITALS

Hillbrow Hospital strike, November 1982

Hillbrow Hospital workers went on strike in November 1982. They were promised immediate wage increases. But later, these promises were taken back, and the workers did not get their wage increases.

Strikes at Durban hospitals, February 1985

On 4 February 1985, over 1000 workers at Durban's major hospitals, King Edward VIII, Wentworth, and R.H. Khan went on strike. The strike lasted for seven days. During the strike, it became clear that hospital workers were struggling not only for higher wages, but also for trade union rights.

The most burning issue for the Durban hospital workers was the low wage rate. The average wage for a hospital worker was below R200 per month. Furthermore, hospital workers did not have adequate pension provisions. Many of them who had to work night duty did not get any allowances. Workers further complained about abusive matrons and supervisors, harsh and arbitrary discipline, tiring and monotonous work, and the high injury rate.

So far, the conditions of Durban hospital workers look very similar to those of Baragwanath Hospital workers: low wages, temporary positions, no allowances for long working hours. The strike at Baragwanath Hospital involved a similar number of workers (if we exclude the nurses), and lasted a similar period of time.

There are, however, important differences.

Representatives of Durban hospital workers had made clear wage demands even before the strike. They initially demanded R700 per month, and later modified this demand for an increase of R100 across the board for all

non-classified staff. They decided to go on strike if there was no wage increase.

As in the case of Bara, Durban hospitals were in chaos when the workers went on strike. But the Bara staff as a whole showed greater unity than the staff of Durban hospitals. In Durban hospitals, nursing staff and maintenance staff took over doing the jobs of the striking workers. This was not the case at Bara. Nurses at Bara refused to be used as scabs. As a result, the SADF was brought in at Bara.



The SADF at Casualty in Bara during the strike

On the other hand, workers at Durban hospitals were more united in the sense that the strike spread over several hospitals. This was probably because the strike was

more organised and planned beforehand, and worker representatives from several hospitals had joint meetings. Workers from King Edward VIII, Wentworth and R.H. Khan Hospitals met beforehand and decided on a joint work stoppage. They all went on strike together on February 4, and all presented the same demands (even though the strike lasted longest at King Edward VIII).

Durban hospital workers were further supported, as Bara workers were, by sympathetic doctors, medical students, and patients.

Like workers and nurses at Bara, Durban hospital workers experienced that talks with the hospital authorities brought little, if any improvement. In the case of both Bara and Durban hospitals, representatives of health authorities arrived on the scene, but they did not address themselves to the grievances of the workers. Nevertheless, a workers' committee of Durban hospital workers in the end managed to negotiate a settlement with the Provincial Administration. The settlement included:

- a 20% wage increase
- unconditional re-instatement of all workers
- withdrawal of all charges against workers
- agreement that all workers report for work again.

The majority of workers accepted the wage compromise, on condition that the workers' committee continued to negotiate with the Provincial Administration.

In a similar way, nurses and workers at Bara hope to negotiate a better deal. But their chances of achieving that are, at the moment, much more slim because the authorities still refuse to negotiate with worker representatives.