

# NURW Statement on SATS Dispute

SALB publishes the following statement from the National Union of Railway Workers (NURW) on their perception of unity during the SATS dispute. The background to NURW's formation goes back to 1984 where independent committees of railway workers were formed, primarily in the E Cape region. (see SALB Vol 12/1 "SATS Wokers on Track") These individual committees eventually formed throughout the country, resulting in the formation of a National Interim Committee. At the launch of NURW in November 1986 the union claimed a total paid up membership of 5 000, with 8 000 signed up. Branches had been established in East London, Western Cape, Port Elizabeth, PWV and Witbank. The union remains committed to unity under COSATU.

## NURW RESPONSE

The strike started at City Deep where a worker was dismissed for an alleged irregularity. In spontaneous action workers downed tools in solidarity and demanded his reinstatement. SARHWU soon became involved and other areas took up the call. NURW members considered the situation and after some discussion sent a delegation to meet with City Deep workers. Workers decided to strike in solidarity and to send a delegation from NURW as additional representatives to negotiate with SATS management. A committee was also elected to co-ordinate and publicise events on behalf of our members who were involved.

At this stage SARHWU took an unprecedented step. Workers meetings were moved to their offices and all NURW members barred from attending. Some members claimed they were harrassed because of their union membership.

On 29th March 1987, officials of ARAHWU telephoned the offices of NURW and expressed concern about the SATS strike. Subsequently, we were informed that a meeting would be convened in SARHWU offices and we agreed to attend. At the meeting between NURW, ARAHWU and SARHWU officials sought to iron out joint action and solidarity and address further burning issues. The result was that SARHWU officials rejected any solidarity or communication on the strike. NURW members continued their strike however on the principle that even if SARHWU officials sought to block worker unity or joint action, we sought to advance the cause of worker unity in practice

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among workers themselves and not among intellectuals or bureaucrats.

#### OUR OBSERVATIONS

The commercial press played a dastardly role. They fostered disunity and misinformation. They chose an anti-working class position by pretending to ignore the efforts and actions of NURW in forging ahead to promote much needed unity in a unique situation - a "rival" union giving active support and seeking to meet and discuss unity between the unions in the face of the enemy. NURW public statements were simply not published. Workers and SARHWU members were kept in the dark by the press and officials were ultimately misled about the role of NURW and the efforts it was making.

A further unfortunate consequence was that the majority of organised workers outside of the reef area, many of these our members, would not participate in any way under these circumstances. This was obviously to the detriment of the strikers and had a direct influence on its nature and outcome, as well as on the future of worker unity in this sector.

NURW, therefore decides not to take any solidarity action which has not first been cleared through negotiation and consensus of all unions affected. The principle of support for democratic progressive organisations did not seem to apply in this crucial strike, our members realise this fully now. SARHWU's actions were neither democratic nor progressive, these actions rather fostered divisions amongst the workers. It is more important to analyse our position as workers and map the way forward as railway workers, as against the interests of bureaucrats and intellectuals in a pressure situation.

As we had predicted, all the workers eventually returned to work or were re-instated. Nevertheless this victory needs to be carefully assessed.

(1) Wage parity is claimed: Grading according to race is still strictly adhered to in SATS. Wage parity is impossible under these conditions. We as workers know that we do not earn the same wage as our white counterparts. Even though we do the same work our grades are different and the wage gap remains in force. We note that SATS does not speak of scrapping the racially discriminating grade system. How can anyone praise such a situation on behalf of railway workers who know better?

(2) Pensions and other benefits are also determined by wage levels so they also remain discriminatory.

(3) As part of the "settlement" SATS said that workers could in future elect representatives of their own choice. We do not need permission to elect our own representatives and leaders. To any real democracy elections of representatives is not new. But will they be recognised and be able to operate with all necessary facilities. We want effective recognition of our democratic rights, not promises that are hailed as glorious.

### CONCLUSIONS

1. NURW maintains that industrial action against SATS can only be fully effective on a national level. Such action must be orchestrated by workers themselves in an organised and democratic way.

2. Non unionised and unorganised workers are not the enemy and should not be seen, as was the case in this instance, as obstacles. Nothing can replace concerted efforts at organising. A large paper membership is as worthless as a sweetheart union. We re-commit ourselves to effectively organising and mobilising railway workers. Every NURW member is an organised member.

3. Whether or not a small number of individuals continue to foster disunity and antagonism, NURW will continue to fight for unity of workers both in SATS and other industries.

As a result of our concern of the present situation of railway workers, NURW has approached COSATU in an effort to raise these questions with them at their National Congress to be held in July 1987. The NEC of NURW has passed a resolution from our members that NURW should apply for registration of a NURW delegation to COSATU's National Congress. Although we are not affiliated to COSATU, we recognise COSATU as the federation under which all workers should be organised. We are, as always, prepared to discuss with all relevant parties, the present situation of railways workers and the road forward. We have requested COSATU to allow us to address the issue of railway workers at their Congress. We wish to put forward our case and hope they will show the same concern about unity as we do.