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M E M O R A N D U M

BARAGWANATH STRIKE

Non classified workers and other sectors of health workers have had grievances about their salaries for as long as 10 years. A meeting was called by NCWs where a committee was elected to voice their problems to the authorities concerned on Tuesday November 1985.

The authorities agreed to meet the committee the following Wednesday November 1985 to give them the answer on their suggestions. At this meeting the NCWs were informed that nothing could be done about their suggestions at this stage. The authorities, at head office in Pretoria, will only be able to discuss the issue in March 1986, for there are no funds available for increases right now.

Emotions were highly string, as it was not only the individual persons who were voicing their concerns about hunger, clothing and a place to stay, but the children of the NCWs too. The current inflation rate and poor economic conditions and the last but not the least, the political problems, a black person is faced with every minute of the day, forced the NCWs to react the way they did. Some earning a salary per year which a doctor receives a month, + R1 800 per year.

After the meeting, no one returned to their duties. The NCWs went on strike then, but declared this only on Thursday, November 1985, when they arrived at Baragwanath but not reporting at their different departments. The strike was peaceful and not militant as some people would have liked and still like to believe. All 840 NCW's gathered in front of the old staff office building. Silence prevailed throughout the whole strike action, which lasted for + 150 - 250 minutes. The SADF and police riot squad were at the scene in a matter of minutes, arriving with 10 ton Police pick up trucks. A few so-called instigators were hand picked by some officers. At that stage the spectators (+ 250) had gathered not too far from the actual scene. A doctor remarked that he only hopes that the individual love and

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trust that has been built up between the few whites and blacks is strong enough to keep these people from getting or becoming drunk with hatred. It is a fact that the authorities had proved their failure and incapability of controlling and solving labour disputes, by calling in the Police and SADF and not forgetting the very aggressive and militant Baragwanath Riot squad. The Police ordered the workers to disperse and when no one did, the first pick up truck was moved closer. From then on no orders were given by the Police. The NCWs got into the trucks themselves without any protest. All in all ± 15 trucks had "successfully" captured the "rioters". A student nurse who was captured too, was standing with a group of extremely surprised and very disgusted doctors, when an officer walked up to the group and dragged her off by her arm. 740 NCW's were arrested on Thursday November 1985. After being released from the 2 police stations where they were taken, all of them had to hear from friends that they have all been dismissed. They were all told to appear in court on Friday 28 November 1985. On either Monday or Tuesday November 1985, at which stage a large majority of the NCW's were informed to collect their cheques from the staff office. After no response from the NCW's a number of them were forced, at gunpoint by SADF members, to collect their cheques. The last news to reach the NCW's from the authorities were that they could re-apply but that they have lost all their benefits. A few NCW's started going back to work, but not necessarily signing re-application forms. One must understand why some did return, in the majority individual cases and would find that it was their inferior sociological positions. May be being the sole breadwinner, or having to send money to parents staying in the "homelands".

By deciding to join their fellow exploited workers in the strike action the student nurses have helped to achieve a major goal in the history of health workers in SA and the world. Nowhere in the world has a nurse been reinstated after going on strike.

The student nurses have been labelled as unprofessional, selfish and irrational people, not considering their first and most important duty, their patients. The authorities treat these student nurses as mechanisms,



people without needs and rights. The grievances with which the student nurses approached the authorities with were:

- 1 The gate of nurses residence is closed at 20h00; Reason: To protect them from male intruders. Every person has individual needs; social contact, psychological stimulation etc.
- 2 Student nurses are not allowed to join any other public organisations; Reason: Political involvement will influence their only duty, care for the patient. A student nurse can not voice her political objectives or views, she can be sure of victimisation or dismissal in some cases. How can one's political objectives influence one's care if you are African, it will only motivate you to do more and care better for your patient, because of the monstrous apartheid system in which they are the oppressed and exploited. Amendments of acts included in the SANA and SANC constitutions, do not allow student nurses or any other category of nursing personnel to join other organisations. SANA and SANC is not democratically elected and are not interested in the true problems of the members. Nursing personnel do not have a choice, they must be members of these organisations. If there is an increase in SANA and SANC membership fees, no one is informed, it is deducted from their salaries automatically. These are only a few of the numerous grievances of exploited people.

If the acts of the student nurses were unprofessional, these forced moves on the authorities' side were amateuristic.

After meeting amongst themselves on Wednesday November 1985 the student nurses decided to strike during the day and only report for duty at night so that the patients should not suffer. Their reason, was that there is enough working staff during the day to attend to patients. Their decision was not respected and later that night a group of student nurses were baton charged, a number of them had to be treated at casualty and were then released. The Baragwanath Riot Squad were the culprits and the SADF ensured a strong presence at nurses residence, aiming guns at people standing in front of windows. It was

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at this stage that the student nurses decided to go out on full strike action. After calling numerous meetings with the authorities and only being heard twice by the Chief Superintendant once on Friday November 1985 and the second on Saturday November 1985, where they were informed of their dismissal. The student nurses' delegation was told to inform the other people that they must vacate the residence by Monday November 1985 by 10h00. They will receive meals until Monday morning.

The authorities have shown their arrogance and ignorance in this Baragwanath Crisis and their incapability to run and administer the biggest hospital in the Southern hemisphere. Authorities would not communicate and the Superintendant proved his failure to solve labour disputes.

It was at this crucial stage that the Health Workers Association started assisting the NCW's and S/N's. GAWUSA was approached in connection with legal aid for these workers being dismissed unlawfully. A group of concerned medical, para-medical and clerical staff, + 300, decided to form a committee who will communicate demands of this group to the chief superintendant. These demands were backed up with a petition which was signed by more than 700 hospital staff. The superintendant had failed every employee of Baragwanath Hospital after refusing to communicate for the umpteenth time.

The next move from the authorities side was to inform student nurses to collect their cheques. There was another message, the S/W's could reapply and if they did that they have lost all their benefits worked for over the years. Those who did re-apply were instructed to sign a supplementary form attached to the application form, stating that you have made yourself guilty of a criminal offence; on which they had to answer yes, the last section read: By rioting.

Some people were forced to re-apply because of the poor economic conditions and in some cases being the sole breadwinners.

The student nurses' demands were:

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- Better food.
- Closing time of gate be extended from 20h00 - 24h00.
- The right to belong to any democratic organisation of their choice.
- Victimisation and prosecution for involvement in other organisations be scrapped.
- Increases in salaries.

The student nurses case was eventually to the Supreme Court. Only 3 different individual cases were presented out of the group of 940 student nurses. Each case was different but included most of the particulars involving the individuals in the group. The lawyers representing the 2 parties sorted out their affidavits on Thursday November 1985 and on Monday the judge gave or presented the outcome. All student nurses must be reinstated. A major victory for the struggle. The workers might have been victorious in this case, but nothing has been done in connection with their demands.

The authorities have tried to divert the blame onto the S/W's only, but if they had given people a chance to voice their grievances, the patients would not have suffered. The well known fact and looking at the crisis at Baragwanath Hospital one would see that the so-called authorities can not give a damn if a black dies or not.

The situation is not what the media is currently reporting. The SADF presence is still great. Armed with sub-machine guns they patrol the hospital grounds. Late at night they drive around in Hippo's and Kaspis diverting a search light on anybody not being inside a building. The psychological impact of the SADF presence is vast on each and every patient. These men kill and maim mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and friends in the townships. Now they try and rectify these great mistakes. Some children have gone through traumatic experiences. These men do not have the patience of a trained nurse. Now that most of the NCW's and S/Ws are back at work, performing their specific functions, it is not understandable what the SADF is still doing at the hospital.



The crisis at Baragwanath has proved the division the apartheid system is succeeding in bringing about within the health system of SA. If hospitals weren't racially orientated institutions, nurses would not have had to go on strike. Everyone in their respective catagories would have received the same salary no matter what their colour, race or creed. How many beds are standing empty at the J G Strydom and Johannesburg General Hospitals? If the Government was so concerned about bringing about change in 'the peoples' country, why don't they change the health system.

Health care is not a privilege, it is a basic right. If the Government could change its financing structures, they would not be preaching privatisation to the rich. The workers rights must be acknowledged first to start building a free, just and democratic health system for all.