



Press Statement

10 March 2023

NEHAWU strike intimidation must be condemned

Defend our Democracy condemns the intimidation aimed at nurses and doctors who have opted to work during strike action being conducted by the National Education, Health, and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU).

The strike which began on Monday, 6 March 2023 was reported to be towards obtaining a 10% increase in salaries for healthcare workers. While we respect the right of workers to protest, call for higher wages, and call out corruption in the sector, strike action cannot undermine the rights of others.

In particular, we are concerned about the impact on patients, with four people having reportedly died as a direct effect of the strike action. It is ironic that as a union, NEHAWU claims to champion the rights of the working class, but it is primarily working-class people – patients who have no other option but to obtain healthcare at state hospitals – who are most negatively impacted.

Reports emerging from hospitals of *sjamboks* being used to intimidate those who have opted to work, of ambulances being turned away from hospital gates, of soiled bedding of patients and urine bags not being changed, of patients going hungry, and of a handful of doctors and nurses performing operations in adverse conditions, leaves us extremely concerned.

Defend our Democracy reflects the views of NEHAWU's sister union, SADTU, that the acts of certain NEHAWU strikers over the last few days reflect "one of the lowest points of our democracy".

This sentiment is extended to the lacklustre approach of the government in effectively dealing with the issue, especially in curbing the thuggery of certain protestors at various hospitals.

Once again, as had occurred during the July 2021 uprising – although on a bigger scale then, members of the public have had to respond to the unfolding crisis. Members of the community have confronted striking workers at least outside one hospital in Gauteng, while ordinary doctors and nurses have been collecting and distributing food so that patients don't starve. Some have reportedly been going to work in plain clothes so that they are not intimidated by protestors.

As the strike concludes its fifth day we must begin to ask, what are the priorities of the government, and is it really concerned about the immediate and potential long-term impact on the health sector? Will the visit of the health minister to a few hospitals be enough to stem the unfolding crisis?

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