



## SOUTH AFRICA

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Thursday, 31 May 2018

### **Statement from People's Health Movement, South Africa**

#### **Violent and potentially life-threatening disruption at Charlotte Maxeke Hospital**

The People's Health Movement, South Africa (PHMSA) supports the right of health workers to take strong, even disruptive industrial action to improve wages and working conditions. PHM believes that the Labour Relations Act, which limits the right to strike of workers who render essential services, makes public sector workers vulnerable to exploitation by limiting their right to strike. If health workers have poor pay and unsafe working conditions, the entire health system, and people's health, is endangered. We believe that these considerations justify disruptive industrial action when other means fail. We do not, however, condone violence, nor action that endangers the lives of vulnerable people.

PHMSA has been closely associated with the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) and has provided training for shop stewards on the political economy of health, primary health care, and the National Health Insurance. Two of our members, Profs Louis Reynolds and David Sanders, both paediatricians, were coopted onto the NEHAWU Health Subcommittee as honorary members.

On 19 April Bhekisisa reported that industrial action in the North West Province was leading to patients not getting their daily medicine, including HIV and tuberculosis treatment and basic antibiotics. Babies missed vaccines that protect them from killer diseases such as measles and pneumonia. The report said that NEHAWU was at the centre of this action. NEHAWU said that the protest action would continue until their demands for better wages and then-premier Supra Mahumapelo's resignation were met.

The report suggested that action by NEHAWU members would harm the health of vulnerable people, as well as the public's health in general. We considered this unacceptable.

Consequently, on 24 April we emailed NEHAWU via the Secretariat expressing our concern about the news reports that industrial action by at least some of their members in the North West Province would harm the health of people with chronic health problems, the elderly, and women and children. We expressed support for the right of health workers to take strong, even disruptive industrial

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action to improve wages, but pointed out that action that harms the health of vulnerable people is unacceptable to us as health professionals.

We asked for assurance that members would protect and promote the health of vulnerable people and patients when participating in industrial action. NEHAWU did not respond to this request.

In early May a NEHAWU spokesperson said in a radio interview that the allegations were only rumours and hearsay. NEHAWU did not want to be associated with such actions and that members found to bring the union into disrepute will be dealt with by NEHAWU and the law.

However, reports persisted of protest action that could harm hospital patients in the North West Province, with some hospitals being forced to close down.

We emailed the union again on 11 May to express our concerns, again with no response.

Today, 31 May 2018, while the situation in the NW province appears to be settling, violent protest closed down Charlotte Maxeke hospital in Gauteng. Reports state that patients have been threatened, chased from the pharmacy, and locked in the basement. Surgical operations have been cancelled. There is video and photographic evidence in social and mainstream media that people wearing NEHAWU T-shirts are prominent in this action.

We have not seen any report of NEHAWU distancing itself from these, or from the reported earlier actions, nor of disciplinary steps being taken against members who may have been involved. Reports linking the union with acts that endanger people's health, whether true or not, inevitably bring the union into disrepute. By extension, such reports bring individuals and organisations merely associated with NEHAWU into disrepute.

PHMSA distances itself from any acts by NEHAWU that causes harm to the health of vulnerable people and to people's health more broadly. We also withdraw our membership of the NEHAWU Health Subcommittee.

**Louis Reynolds & David Sanders**  
**People's Health Movement, South Africa**

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