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## Union nurses fight for a free South Africa

It has been a year since Thami Skenjana and Khumbu Mtinjane addressed the INA convention, speaking of the plight of nurses in South Africa.

In recent communications to the Illinois Labor Network Against Apartheid, of which INA/D21 is a part, Khumbu and Thami gave an update. Khumbu noted that "We still are suffering. No change. One is still being harrassed, though in a more sutle manner." Thami wrote, "We shall be attending the mass funeral on Friday [Sept. 18]. We do not know what the outcome will be. Maybe we shall be shot at during the funeral."

At Khumbu and Thami's request, the Network will send a video of Chicago anti-apartheid activities for a union conference next month in SA to "boost the morale of health workers."

Labor Network coordinator Harold Rogers visited Johannesburg in August. A long-time anti-apartheid leader, Rogers is an aide to Cong. Charles Hayes and on the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists national executive board.

Leading a tour of 26 Chicago teachers, Rogers took an hour bus ride to SA's largest public hospital located in Soweto. The hospital, according to Rogers, is about ten times the size of Cook County Hospital! The hospital's 3,000 employees were then on strike, part of 30,000 striking public health employees, including nurses, represented by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU).

Viewing the strike from across the street, the Chicagoans were about ready to get off the bus and join the protest. Strikers were picketing in a circle near the hospital's main gate, surrounded by SA Defense Force hippos (mini armored tanks). The SADF suddenly opened fire with tear gas and started beating people

with clubs without provocation. *had*

SA union leaders encouraged Rogers to go to the strike. They routinely ask foreign visitors to observe what SA is really like, not what the government wants you to think it is like.

NEHAWU's strike was a major test of the right of SA public health workers to strike. Strike issues included wages and an end to the old apartheid practice of classifying non-professional black hospital workers as "temporary," even those with 20-30 years on the job. The classification system keeps black workers wages low and denies them pension rights and job security. Wages of black health workers are as low as \$150/month. At press time, results of mediation of the strike were unknown.

NEHAWU is an affiliate of COSATU, SA's major labor federation. In June COSATU launched a campaign of rolling mass action to stop the escalating violence and to force the government to give up white-minority rule. Rallies, consumer boycotts and occupations of government buildings have occurred throughout the country. Massive strikes and protests continue today.

On Aug. 3, four million workers staged a three-day national strike. People took to the streets all over the country and for a few days COSATU occupied the seat of the national government in Pretoria. [It would be as if tens of thousands of peaceful U.S. strikers were to occupy the Capitol in Washington, DC.]

What can we do? SA unions ask U.S. unions to exert maximum economic and diplomatic pressure on President De Klerk and U.S. corporations in SA:

- to stop state-sponsored death squads and ensure a peaceful transfer of power to a majority government;
- to stop privatization and economic restructuring designed to deny wealth to the black majority when it comes to power; and

• to rehire workers fired for exercising their right to strike and other democratic rights. (7,600 striking NEHAWU members were fired and 3,000 other workers were dismissed as a result of mass action and living wage struggles this summer.)

SA unions warn that we should exercise caution regarding SA visitors, many of whom seek to undermine SA unions and pressure on the government, and are linked in some way to DeKlerk's regime.

While in SA, Harold Rogers met with COSATU leaders. He told Backbone of the importance SA unions attach to establishing greater solidarity between their unions and ours.

On June 16, 1976, while hundreds of thousands of children were boycotting apartheid education, the police opened fire on unarmed school children. Hundreds were slaughtered; many more were injured. Today, in South Africa, many of the local union leaders were part of the 1976 school uprising.

Young and militant, South Africa's labor activists are determined that their children will not live under apartheid, no matter what price they have to pay. "One more day of apartheid is one more day too long," COSATU says.