

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Taking stock



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As we come to the end of this round of public sector industrial action it is time to take stock of several things. Employees in the public sector are poorly paid – and of course I am concentrating on the health sector here, although this is no less true for other parts of the public sector such as education.

Nurses, in particular, receive low wages for onerous work, with little in the way of incentives such as good pensions or even, ironically, better access to health care themselves. However, I do know that, although working conditions are arguably considerably better, nursing is still not particularly well paid in the private sector. The differences between material gain between the public sector and the private sector for doctors, however, is quite another matter. The hard work that goes into a successful private practice is extremely well rewarded, while equally hard work in the public sector does not result in anything approaching the same annual return.

On top of this we have the appalling and conspicuous consumption by our politicians, which has become considerably worse since Mr Zuma came to power. Luxury cars, expensive entertainment and huge mansions or expensive hotels – all at taxpayers' expense – now appear to be an acceptable part of public office. And it is the constant media attention to this waste of taxpayers' money that is arguably the main reason for the press muzzling that is on the cards.

But it is not poor pay and working conditions that hit the headlines during the recent strike action. Day after day the front pages of the newspapers were filled with photographs of out-of-control mobs – comprising such supposedly responsible members of the community as teachers and health care workers. Stories of babies dying because

they were simply abandoned in the wards, patients without food or other care, surgery interrupted by screaming mobs, were the norm. The much-maligned private sector behaved in exemplary fashion, taking in emergency patients at no cost and many private hospitals in Gauteng were full.

Was there any excuse for this behaviour? What are we to think about our nurses when one was heard saying that the patients were going hungry but that this was government's fault? What about the patients who were violently turned away from seeking care and the voluntary workers and those who chose to continue to work, who were at the very least intimidated and at worst landed up in intensive care?

South Africa has a history of violent responses to perceived wrongs. And that history seems destined to repeat itself *ad nauseam*. The striking public sector workers lost the sympathy of many who would otherwise have supported them. The strike has now run out of steam – even though the workers have not had their demands met, a month without pay is too much for most of them to cope with. So nothing has been achieved, other than deaths, injury, patients without chronic medications and the potential complications that this will cause – and the low pay and poor conditions continue.

All these problems need to be addressed, as does the generally appalling state of the public health sector. But this is not the way to do it. We need government to take its head out of the trough for a moment and listen to the legitimate grievances of the people they were elected to serve. We need adequate service delivery and we need it now. Mr Zuma and your cabinet, you ignore your people at your peril.

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