

Beautiful on outside, unsafe inside

Workers down tools at Health Department building in city

JAMES MAHLOKWANE
james.mahlokwane@inl.co.za

WORKERS at the Department of Health, who yesterday downed tools due to what they described as the unhealthy condition of their offices in Thabo Sehume Street in the CBD, will immediately vacate the building temporarily.

The decision was taken at an urgent meeting yesterday between the Minister of Health Dr Aaron Motsoaledi and his Public Works colleague Thulas Nxesi after more than 200 workers downed tools.

At the meeting, the ministers decided the workers should vacate the building as soon as possible until it has been renovated. This will be the second time the building is temporarily vacated to allow for renovations.

The ministers met after employees embarked on a strike, unhappy about their safety in the landmark building.

Health Department spokesperson Popo Maja said they first vacated the building in 2005 for refurbishment and returned in 2010 with the impression that all was well.

However, in 2014, it was discovered there were still problems such as faulty elevators, water pipelines, air-cons, fire extinguishers, alarms and the roof. Another round of refurbishments began while staff continued to use the building.

Maja said the ministers agreed that they did not want another short-cut; this time around they wanted a full refurbishment to ensure the safety and health of all the workers at the department. "When the

renovations were done, a clearance certificate was received and awarded to the department to show that the building was a good working environment.

"However, over the years, a report commissioned by the department showed that certain areas needed to be repaired," Maja said.

The department urgently called investigators from the Department of Public Works to examine the condition of the building after concerned workers refused to pass the security checkpoint and reception yesterday.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) and the Public Servants Association of South Africa led the demonstrations in the interest of the workers.

The unions said the building caused many workers many illnesses. They claimed that the roof was leaking and some parts of the ceilings were falling on the workers.

Workers said the building was beautiful on the outside with its shiny green glass exterior, but it was terrible and dangerous on the inside.

"This place is a nightmare and management has been ignoring our pleas for a long time.

"We are happy the unions are pushing them to take action. We continue to get sick because we work in a building that does not meet occupation standards," said an employee, who asked not to be named.

Nehawu secretary Mashudu Magagadeli said: "We are not preventing employees who want to work from doing so, but in future more workers will not work because they are all concerned about their health and safety.

"At the moment, approximately 200 workers are demonstrating. This



Department of Health workers downed tools yesterday over the unsafe and unhealthy condition of their offices.

PICTURES: BONGANI SHILUBANE/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY (ANA)

is something that will also benefit management because they are also affected, and unfortunately leadership cannot participate because they have to solve this problem."

Shop steward Bhungani Nzolo said: "Workers circulated pictures that showed that rain leaked into the building and of ceilings falling. We have resolved that management should provide a certificate that the building was cleared for occupation if it does not acknowledge this problem.

"Workers cannot continue to be exposed to this danger forever."

The workers placed placards in the building which read: "There is water everywhere in this building and it is falling on us" and "they only want to listen now because we are taking action."

Maja said that for the comfort of the workers, neighbours and the public, it was important to state that the building was improved to avoid a total collapse in the future.

"The building is strong and only internal issues needed attention," he said.



The department's building looks good on the outside, but inside, the ceiling is broken.