



'Unsafe' Health HQ in lockdown

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Employees of the Department of Health blocked the entrances to the department's head office, unhappy with the bad state of the building. THE Department of Health yesterday had to ask police to help reopen two of three entrances blocked by workers demanding urgent repairs of its head office in Pretoria.

The workers downed tools and spent the day picketing at the main entrance on Thabo Sehume Street. During that time, a few workers entered through side entrances.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) and the Public Servants Association led the demonstration, unhappy with what they perceived to be a failure by the department as well as Public Works to attend to the air-conditioning, leaking ceilings, fire extinguishers and dusty carpets.

The unions said they reached an agreement with Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi and Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi earlier this year that workers would leave the building at 1pm for engineers to effect repairs, but that did not happen.

The staff and unions said they staged the total shutdown to send a strong message to Motsoaledi and management.

Nehawu shop steward Bhungani Mzolo said: "Our core demand is for Motsoaledi to shut down work in the building for two full weeks to allow experts and engineers to start the urgent repairs.

"Our members cannot continue working in these unhealthy conditions. The building is 80% non-compliant with Occupational Health and Safety Standards. It is just a mess inside and our members are falling ill due to the dusty carpets and poor air-conditioning."

Department spokesperson Popo Maja said while they acknowledged the complaints as legitimate, blocking entrances and forcing other staff to join the protest was unconstitutional.

"Yes, the issues they raise are legitimate. They affect everybody, including Minister Motsoaledi. However, we cannot afford to shut down the office for two weeks because that's not in our mandate.

“Important work needs to be done and we are delighted that there are staff members working despite the protest. Ministers Motsoaledi and Nxesi have been working tirelessly to resolve this matter. Truth be told, there is not a single alternative to this building here in Pretoria.”

The unions also demanded that the departments instituted forensic investigations into alleged corruption said to have taken place between 2004 and 2010 when the Department of Health vacated the building for renovations.

“We told Motsoaledi that we believe there is a lot of corruption taking place in the name of supply chain management.

“We want the department to suspend an official whom we believe is directly involved in the corruption and institute a forensic audit, but he (Motsoaledi) is not taking us seriously,” said Nehawu’s Mzolo.

Maja said Motsoaledi agreed with the workers that allegations of corruption were very serious and should be investigated.

“Our biggest message to the unions and staff is that they should demonstrate in a democratic manner and not force all staff members to participate in the protests when they would rather work.”

Nehawu’s acting chairperson for the Department of Health branch, Khezikazi Nkabinde, said: “Last week, the unions decided that they would not allow their members to go inside to work, but some people defied this resolution. However, many were resolute and stood in the foyer to protest.”

The SA Health Products Regulatory Authority, which replaced the Medicines Control Council as the country’s regulatory authority, said it had contingency plans to ensure its essential services were not disrupted by this protest.

The entity’s staff are stationed in the same building. They ensure that health products available to the public are safe, effective and of good quality.