

# HoD denies assault charge

**Nehawu treasurer opens case with police after meeting over building**

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An assault charge has been filed against the head of the provincial economic development department after an alleged scuffle with union leaders at the department's offices in King William's Town on Monday.

The HoD, Bongani Gxilishe, had gathered staff members at a building adjacent to the Beacon Hill building – which houses mostly social development employees and a few economic development staffers – to talk about issues relating to the safety of the building.

King William's Town police spokesperson Captain Siphokazi Mawisa confirmed that a docket had been opened and that investigations had commenced.

Last week, employees were evacuated from the Beacon Hill building after a gas leak was detected prior to rolling electricity blackouts.

The Dispatch has seen a text that was circulated among social development managers on Monday, alerting them that Buffalo City Metro inspectors had done an assessment of the building and recommended that the department vacate it.

"It has now become urgent that an emergency evacuation plan be developed and an EEP [emergency evacuation plan] team be set up.

"By now, the department has lost four working days hampering service delivery and governance compliance immensely," the text reads.

The Dispatch was not able to get confirmation of the inspection from the municipality.

On Monday, the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union treasurer at economic development, Nondumiso Mtuzula, claimed she was manhandled by Gxilishe when discussions relating to the safety of workers at the building became heated.

"The HoD assaulted me inside the meeting because I just called him out for the foul language he used when addressing us.

"He does not want to listen to us, he just gets angry.

"I never thought I'd be manhandled for voicing concerns regarding employees' safety issues," Mtuzula said.

Gxilishe had gathered the



**HEATED MEETING:** Left, social development spokesperson Mzukisi Solani speaks to economic development HOD Bongani Gxilishe, after he told staff not to enter the department's offices for their own safety. Right, Nondumiso Mtuzula, of Nehawu, claims Gxilishe assaulted her during a heated meeting with staff in King William's Town. Pictures: MICHAEL PINYANA



**DANGEROUS FUMES:** Workers from various government departments in King William's Town are not allowed to enter this building as it is not safe due to a gas leak.

workers after they arrived for work to find the building closed.

The Dispatch has reported extensively on safety concerns regarding the building, which unions have previously claimed resulted in the death of an employee.

When the Dispatch arrived at the building on Monday, the meeting had just been adjourned.

Responding to a request for comment on the assault allegation, Gxilishe said he had not laid a finger on Mtuzula.

He said when he was addressing the meeting, Mtuzula and other unionists had requested the meeting be suspended so they could caucus.

"I said they can have a caucus later on but we should finish the official department meeting first.

"I closed the official meeting and as I was leaving I could hear a lady shouting and insulting [me]. I immediately turned back towards her to inquire why she was behaving like that.

"When I approached her, they thought I'm going to confront her, so she retreated.

"I did not even get to her – I did not even touch her for that matter," he said.

Commenting on the evacuation of employees, Gxilishe said they would move staff to alternative buildings.

Public works acting HoD Mahlubandile Qwase said the building would be vacant for about a week to extract the gas. "Only when the air quality is proved to be in good condition can they be brought back there.

"We are currently making

sure that there is temporary accommodation available for the workers.

"We have secured 3,600m<sup>2</sup> as of now," he said.

Qwase and social development HoD Ntombi Baart held a meeting with unions at the Bhisho youth centre in an attempt to find a solution to the impasse. At the time of writing, the outcome of the meeting were still unknown.