

South African public sector workers hold mass one-day strike

Our reporter
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One million public sector workers went on strike on Tuesday, August 24 in South Africa. The majority were black members of three unions affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), but there were also members of nine other unions affiliated to the mainly white Federation of Unions of South Africa.

Marches took place in many towns and cities. It is estimated that almost 600,000 workers took part in these organised marches, in the largest action since the fall of apartheid. According to the BBC online news service, 35,000 demonstrators marched in Pretoria and in Cape Town 10,000 demonstrators brought the city centre to a standstill. There were also marches and mass meetings in Bloemfontein, Nelspruit, Pietersburg, Mafikeng, Durban and Bisho. The workers taking part in the strike and demonstrations included teachers, nurses, prosecutors, police and civil servants. According to the *South African Mail and Guardian* many schools were closed, and hospitals and the judicial system only maintained a skeleton service.

The ANC government had been negotiating with union leaders for seven months. Initially, the unions were asking for a 10 percent wage increase, but later reduced this to 7.3 percent. The government is set on imposing a 6.3 percent increase. Public service minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketti said this was the government's final offer. Fraser-Moleketi and other ministers accepted a memorandum from marchers in Pretoria outside the Parliament gates. She said the government would not respond to the marchers' demands. "We have received the memorandum, we will engage it, and we will see you back in the chamber within days."

South Africa has seen many workers taking industrial action over the last few months. Telecom and post

office employees returned to work on Monday, August 23. Communication Workers Union (CWU) General Secretary Seleboho Kiti said that industrial action in the form of go-slows, work-to-rule and overtime bans will continue. There have also been strikes by miners, railway workers, textile workers and Volkswagen workers. Ten thousand coal miners have been on strike since August 20.

The recent national congress of COSATU highlighted job losses in South Africa. While 350,000 new workers join the labour market each year, more jobs are being destroyed. Between 1996 and 1999, 365,000 jobs in the non-agricultural sector were lost. Between 1997 and 1999, 150,000 mining jobs went, with a further 28,000 scheduled to be cut in the next two months. In the same period, 110,000 manufacturing jobs, 22,000 textile and clothing jobs and 110,000 construction jobs have gone. Between 1998 and 1999, 110,000 service and transport sector jobs went, together with 10,000 in finance.

Despite growing anger from workers, the ANC government is using its majority support in the recent election to push ahead with its plans to restructure the economy. This includes privatising and cutting public sector jobs, pushing through more job losses in private industry and imposing wage cuts. (With inflation around 10 percent the offer of 6.3 percent to public sector workers represents a cut in real terms.)

COSATU's three-day conference, held August 18-20, made clear it would attempt to keep opposition to the government to a minimum and put forward no alternative to the ANC's restructuring policies. The main purpose of the conference was to elect officials to replace COSATU leaders who had become members of parliament after the general election.

All that the conference proposed on wages and jobs was a "three-pronged programme" to be carried out by

a special Central Executive Committee. Each week a different industry would be highlighted to call for the defence of jobs and workers' rights. There would be local action in each of the COSATU regions and a further national strike would be called if government and employers did not respond to these actions.

At the start of the conference, acting COSATU President Peter Malope attacked the government for imposing its wage offer without coming to an agreement with the unions. He was immediately rebuked by ANC Chairman Patrick Lekota, who told him that complaints against the government should be made privately inside the tripartite alliance between the ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Lekota said there was a “smell of a lack of revolutionary discipline, particularly since those opinions have never been raised in the movement”. He suggested that public disputes between the ANC government and COSATU would confuse “mass-based support”.

Any break-up of the tripartite alliance and criticism of the government was also opposed by SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande, speaking on the second day of the conference. “The alliance still remains the only vehicle for taking forward the transformation in our country,” he said. Suggesting that criticism of the ANC government came only from a right-wing direction, he said, “To abandon the ANC would be to agree with those who try to present the ANC as a conservative, elite organisation.”

Interviewed on television at the end of the conference, Lekota and COSATU Secretary General Zwelinzima Vavi denied that there was any danger of a split between the ANC and COSATU. Vavi stated that “the alliance still has a long role to play”. Differences over public sector wages and government economic policy were minimised. “It is not an issue for us to split,” added Lekota. The ANC and COSATU supported each other on “90 percent of issues”.



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