

Workers Struggles: Africa

12 July 2002

South African municipal workers' strike

The national strike organised by the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) is now ending its second week. The action, which is SAMWU's first strike in seven years, is in support of a claim for an across-the-board pay rise of 10 percent or R300 (\$29.65), whichever is greater. The action involves cleansing, water, abattoir, housing, health, electricity, roads, community and emergency services. It began on July 2, when the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) threatened to impose an eight percent pay rise.

Feelings are running high amongst striking workers, who have organised marches, pickets and demonstrations in many cities in support of their demands, including a 10,000 strong march to the city council headquarters in Johannesburg.

More than a hundred strikers were arrested on July 4 in Komga, East London, for obstructing a road. Police Superintendent Eddie Watts said that, according to a court interdict, the marchers were not allowed to come within half a kilometre of municipal buildings.

In Edenvale, near Johannesburg, a driver knocked over a marcher. According to *Business Day*, a traffic officer took the driver to a local police station to report the incident. His vehicle was set alight and gutted.

The paper also reports that the same day a striking SAMWU member was shot in Strand, Western Cape, during a dispute between a group of strikers and seven workers who refused to support the strike. The striker was shot in the side and taken to hospital in a serious condition.

SAMWU has reported that on July 9, police beat five strikers during a peaceful march in Ballito, KwaZulu-Natal. Police claim they were "causing disorder on the roads".

In Durban strikers overturned rubbish bins and spread litter on the streets. The city authorities feared that such actions would be an embarrassment in the run up to the

meeting of the 53 leaders of the African Union held on July 8-9. Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota told journalists that the protesters had a constitutional right to strike, but "the smashing of rubbish bins is not part of that right... The security forces of the country will act against anybody who will attempt to frustrate our effort to clean the city." Security around the city was increased, with a heavy presence of uniformed and plain-clothes police.

In a press statement issued on July 9, the South African Transport Allied Workers' Union threatened solidarity strike action "should SALGA deliberately continue to frustrate efforts to resolve this strike amicably". The Food and Allied Workers Union, whose members have been on strike at Simba factories since May 20 in support of a R300 pay claim, has also threatened secondary action. The National Union of Metal Workers has pledged to call on its members to support the strikers' picket lines. The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union and the Communication Workers Union have made a call for "public support".

Nigerian national strike called off

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has called off the one-day "warning strike" scheduled for July 10 and instructed workers across the country to continue with their normal duties. The strike, which would have involved all the NLC's affiliated unions, was in support of a 25 percent wage demand.

Last week the NLC Council-in-Session directed "all affiliated unions to effectively mobilise their members with a view to ensuring total compliance with the one-day warning strike." But less than 24 hours before the action was due NLC President Adams Oshiomhole announced that the "top hierarchy" of the congress had met with representatives of the federal government and opened negotiations on the controversial wage increase. He said, "...we are confident that we will be able to work out an agreed level of salary increase arising from

the 25 percent agreement.”

The senior advocate of Nigeria, Chief Afe Babalola, who is also pro-chancellor of the University of Lagos, called on the NLC to abandon the strike “in the interest of the survival of the nation’s economy”. He said that instead of resorting to the strike option, workers should embrace legal means in settling industrial disputes. “The workers have a duty to the nation and themselves not to disrupt the economy”.

Nigerian oil workers strike for pay parity

An all-out strike of workers at TotalFinaElf Nigeria began on July 5. The strike involves members of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN). According to *This Day* (Lagos) the strikers have “the full backing of their colleagues in other major oil companies.” The dispute is over the failure of management to honour an agreement to harmonise workers’ salaries after the merger between two French oil firms, TotalFina and Elf Aquitaine, last year. Instead, workers were given N1,900 (\$15.70) increment.

The action began in the Lagos and Port Harcourt offices of Elf Petroleum and at first was limited to the offices. A union spokesperson said, “If management does not meet our demands by Friday [July 5] our field staff will join.”

Elf is part of a joint venture with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), which holds 60 percent of equity on behalf of the Nigerian government. Strike action is likely to reduce government revenue by \$2.33 million a day.



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