

South African strike against unemployment and poverty

Chris Talbot
1 July 2005

Hundreds of thousands of workers took part in a national one-day strike June 27 called by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) against unemployment and poverty. Some 30,000 people marched through Johannesburg, a similar number in Cape Town and tens of thousands in other cities throughout the country.

According to figures from employers' organizations some 80 percent of gold miners joined the action, 70 percent of coal miners and 50 percent in the diamond and platinum sector. There were large contingents of textile workers on the marches as over 40,000 have lost their jobs since January 2003. DaimlerChrysler and Volkswagen were only able to carry out limited production, whilst the steel and engineering sector reported that large plants were closed with 20 percent of the industry affected.

Official unemployment stands at 26 percent, but if those who no longer bother to seek work because of the lack of prospects are included the figure is 41 percent. This is double the figure of 10 years ago. A quarter of workers in the formal sector and two thirds of workers in the informal sector, domestic and agricultural work earn less than US\$150 a month. Approximately 4 million people out of a population of 44 million are living in extreme poverty, defined as less than US\$1 a day.

The situation is made worse by the fact that some 5.3 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, with up to 500,000 people in need of immediate medication. Less than 1 percent of these are covered by the government's antiretroviral treatment plan.

As well as the unemployment, poverty and AIDS situation, some 2-3 million people are without adequate housing. The government's lack of response has prompted a growing number of protest demonstrations

in the suburbs of the main cities.

Despite this worsening social disaster, President Thabo Mbeki has made clear that he intends to proceed with policies demanded by the financial elite and big business sector.

He recently sacked Deputy President Jacob Zuma, a veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle who is popular with the African National Congress (ANC) youth movement and the South African Communist Party (SACP). In Zuma's place he has appointed Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, whose appointment has been welcomed by business interests. As minerals and energy minister, she was responsible for introducing free-market measures that have cost tens of thousands of jobs already in mining with even more to go. She is identified with the business wing of the party and is well thought of by the mining interests such as Anglo, Harmony and De Beers.

The ANC is due to discuss a new economic policy document at its national general council next week. "Some of the things suggested in the economics paper came as a shock to many ANC people," said Minister of Arts and Culture Pallo Jordan. Speaking to the *South African Mail and Guardian* he said: "There will probably be very heated debate about it."

The proposals involve waiving the minimum wage for young workers and making it easier for employers to sack them. Companies employing less than 200 workers would be exempted from some labour laws. This would exempt the vast majority of smaller firms. The ANC youth league complained that the proposals introduced "cheap labour by the back door." The SACP said that the proposals "overwhelmingly represent an attack on existing worker rights."

COSATU was obliged to call the strike and protest marches because of the mounting anger among South

African workers and youth. Their aim was to let off steam and to prevent serious opposition to the ANC government's free-market programme from emerging. COSATU has already shown its willingness to collaborate with the ANC leadership, despite its public façade of protesting. According to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, COSATU officials met with Mlambo-Ngcuka before the strike and indicated their willingness to call off future actions in response to more negotiations, but said it was too short notice to stop the recent action from going ahead.

Both COSATU and the SACP have been allied to the ANC since the days of the anti-apartheid struggle and have been loyal supporters of the government since it came to power. They have no alternative perspective to that of the government and have been partners in drawing up and implementing the very policies against which they are now protesting. Insofar as they have differences with the government, it is that they want a more nationalist approach to economic policy. COSATU is demanding that shops sell 75 percent locally made products and wants the government to put pressure on business to save jobs and buy local goods. A major plank of its campaign is for "safeguard measures to protect industries under threat from Chinese imports." This kind of economic nationalism would pit South African workers against Chinese workers and working people internationally.

In his address to the demonstrators, COSATU Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi appealed to the ANC Freedom Charter, the fiftieth anniversary of which had been celebrated the previous day. He pointed out that the Charter promised work and security for all and that the country's wealth would be shared by all the people of South Africa. Instead, he said, 11 years after majority rule was established there was growing inequality and a tiny minority still controls the country's wealth.

He did not point out that the same charter, which was signed at Kliptown near Soweto in 1955, guaranteed the freedom to the very capitalist businesses that are sacking workers. Unemployment and poverty are the consequences of the capitalist programme that COSATU and the SACP have supported for half a century. The measures of amelioration that they hoped would be introduced by an ANC government depended on the existence of a relatively isolated national

economy, in which certain reforms could be implemented. But the globalized economy has undermined the possibility of implementing national reformist programmes. Just across the border in Zimbabwe there is a very harsh example of what isolation from the world market means these days—an isolation imposed by the Western powers. In Zimbabwe 80 percent of the population is working in what is euphemistically called the informal sector. Hunger is rife and AIDS is spreading unchecked. In their different ways, Zimbabwe and South Africa express the total bankruptcy of the nationalist agenda.

Media reports and employers' organisations have played down the response to the strike, but considering COSATU's record of calling such token protests whilst remaining in an alliance with the ANC government, the turnout was large and reflects the growing anger of working people at the worsening position facing the mass of the population since the end of apartheid.

But the protesters need to make a serious assessment of the record and political perspective of the ANC. There is increasing talk of a split within the ANC between the business wing and the working class. This reflects the extreme tensions that are developing as the government implements its pro-business policies. But working people would no be better served by a left-wing split from the ANC, since the perspective of such a group would still be that of the capitalist programme on which the ANC was originally founded. What is needed is an entirely different perspective based on socialist internationalism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)