

South Africa: Public sector workers strike demands pay increase

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In what is being described as one of the biggest strikes in South African history, public sector workers mounted a second Friday of protest action across the country demanding a pay raise of 12 percent. On Friday, May 25, demonstrations were held in many towns and cities in preparation for the strike action taken on June 1.

With over 700,000 taking part, services across the board are being disrupted. Seventeen trade unions were involved with memberships totaling close to 1 million.

The BBC reported police firing rubber bullets outside a hospital in Cape Town in attempts to disperse demonstrating nurses. Nurses and doctors joining the strike have been threatened with disciplinary action by public service and administration minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi.

The education sector is also being affected and workers in justice, home affairs and correctional services were involved in the walkouts. The strike was observed across all nine provinces in South Africa. Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) spokesman Patrick Craven told Reuters, "Reports so far indicate a very, very good turnout."

An offer of a pay increase of between 6.5 and 9 percent will be the basis for new negotiations starting early next week. Unions have been calling for a 12 percent increase in the basic wage of public service workers, as well as renegotiations of benefits such as health care coverage. Long-running talks between the government and trade unions broke down earlier in May. Trade unions have pledged that action will continue until the government meets its demands.

The strike action must be viewed against a background of ever greater levels of social inequality. One teacher, from a school in the township of Soweto near Johannesburg, explained their reasons for taking

strike action to the BBC's Network Africa programme: "As a teacher I'm earning peanuts, I teach many students but soon after they complete their studies, they earn way more than I do."

A report issued in 2004 by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) noted growing trends of social inequality which had increased since the end of apartheid in 1994. Of particular significance is the fact that inequality among black African households is at a much higher level than in the white population.

The Gini coefficient, which is used to measure social inequality, calculates wealth distribution across the population. The more equal a society the figure will be closer to 0, whilst societies more unequal would be represented by a figure closer to 1. Noting that South Africa, with a Gini coefficient of 0.6, compared with Brazil as one of the most unequal countries in the world, the study commented, "This overall figure, however, hides a particular aspect: the Gini is higher amongst African [black] households than amongst non-African households. This is the result of some African households improving their position—a process that started in the 1990s, but accelerated after 1994."

It would be more correct to say "few," rather than "some" black households have improved their position. While a thin layer of black entrepreneurs often associated with the ruling African National Congress have risen to high positions, the vast majority of South Africans have seen little improvement.

Huge levels of inequality have created yet more problems. In February 2007, the murder rate remained one of the highest in the world at around 18,000 each year. According to the South African Police Service, for the year 2005 there were 54,926 rapes and 2,320 kidnappings. This has become an increasing concern in

business circles, which view high levels of crime as an impediment to attracting foreign investment.

Having come to power in 1994 claiming to create new opportunities for those who had been oppressed and to make a more equal and fair society, the ANC has shown itself to be a party of big business and the rich. Those who claimed that victory over apartheid meant a progressive and even socialist future for South Africa have been proven wrong.

South Africa has instead ended up, as with all other developing nations, entirely dependent on foreign investment and thus the banks and corporations of the imperialist powers.

This can be seen, as an example, in the structure of the membership of COSATU. According to an article by the BBC in 2004, whilst its membership had fallen by the relatively small margin of 2 million to 1.7 million since 1994, traditional jobs such as mining and manufacture had been replaced by more service orientated jobs, including banking. The article noted, “Worker numbers in traditional manufacturing and mining strongholds have fallen sharply as companies, often responding to global market conditions, have slimmed down, restructured and mechanised.”

Even the ANC’s proposals in its first years of government for a “redistribution and development programme,” proposing some minor social concessions with increased state support, was considered too radical. After only a few years, a much more right-wing programme entitled “Growth, employment and redistribution” (Gear) was adopted that saw the continual cutting of public spending and the creeping privatisation of previously state-owned industries, the telecommunications industry being just one example.

Having instituted the right of workers to strike shortly after its coming to power in 1994 under pressure from the masses, the government has in this latest confrontation taken out an order which forbids strikes in “essential services” and has also fully backed the deployment of police to protect against any “intimidating” behaviour by demonstrators.

Despite at various points mounting struggles against the ANC’s increasingly rightward moves, COSATU along with the South African Communist Party (SACP) has given invaluable backing to the government.

In 2002 COSATU launched its so-called “anti-privatisation” protests against the ANC’s sell-off state

assets to the private sector. Yet it remains part of the tripartite alliance with the ANC and SACP. It claims to continue this alliance in order to realize the “national democratic revolution” in South Africa and states that it believes that “broad fronts” are the most effective way to bring about change.

What South Africa’s “national democratic” revolution established was the environment necessary for a small layer of black businessmen to join the ruling class, which has been encouraged by the policy of “black economic empowerment.” By continuing the alliance with the ANC and SACP, COSATU shares responsibility for the privatizations, cuts in state spending and public sector wages it claims to oppose. At all times the main priority of the union bureaucracy is to safeguard its own privileges that depend on its ability to police and impose the demands of the government and the major corporations. A genuine improvement for workers cannot be achieved through protests and struggles led by such bodies.



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