

General strike hits South Africa

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More than half a million workers marched through the towns and cities of South Africa on June 13. They were amongst the hundreds of thousands of workers taking one-day solidarity strike action in support of the all-out strike of public service workers that had entered its 13th day. They included municipal workers, taxi and bus drivers, electricity and cleaning workers, administrative staff and officials from border posts and airports.

The sympathy strike received massive support all over the country. Essential services were affected, and cities like Durban were brought to a complete standstill. Some workers who did not take strike action also took part in lunchtime protests.

The strike of nearly 1 million public service workers began on June 1. It involves 17 unions, including teachers, nurses and other civil servants. They came out in support of a demand for an across-the-board increase of 12 percent, plus increases in health and housing benefits.

Schools and hospitals have been forced to close. On June 8, armed soldiers and police were deployed at schools and hospitals around the country. According to the *Mail & Guardian*, soldiers wearing bulletproof vests and armed with R4 automatic rifles joined police at Kalafong Hospital.

In an attempt to intimidate workers, Public Service Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi of the ANC obtained an interdict from the Labour Court forbidding workers in essential services from joining the strike. This included the water industry, the courts and correctional services, emergency health provision, nursing and medical, and paramedics. Fraser-Moleketi immediately declared that essential workers who did not return to work by June 4 would be summarily dismissed. She told the BBC, "Our recognition of the right to strike...does not cover essential service workers."

She warned that criminal action would be taken against strikers who broke the law.

More than 600 strikers have been sent letters of dismissal. Nurses were served with copies of the ultimatum when they were on picket duty. Despite the interdict, large numbers of nurses remain on strike. Airports Company of South Africa reported that some immigration officials were on strike. In Cape Town, teachers have been picketing the hospitals in support of nurses who have been threatened with firing.

At the Addington Hospital in Durban, several nurses were wounded when police opened fire on the fourth day of the strike. Twenty nurses were arrested as they blocked the entrances. On the day of the mass sympathy strike, thousands gathered outside the parliament building in Cape Town.

Many strikers spoke bitterly about the contrast between their demand for a 12 percent increase and the 57 percent that has been recommended for President Thabo Mbeki and his cabinet. One striker told Reuters, "They live in luxury, we still stay in poverty."

Hospital workers pointed out that even though they work in the health sector, they cannot afford to pay for medical aid.

The militancy and determination of the workers involved in the strike and the widespread support in the population are an expression of massive disaffection with the ANC government. South Africa, according to the United Nations Development Programme, is among the most unequal countries in the world—third from the bottom behind only Brazil and Guatemala. The country is becoming increasingly polarised, headed as it is by a small clique of black businessmen and -women, mostly made up of leading members of the ANC, enriching themselves through the government's policy of Black Economic Empowerment.

A report published by the South African Institute of Race Relations demonstrated that the living conditions

for millions of South Africans have worsened since the ending of apartheid 13 years ago. Official unemployment currently stands at 26 percent, but the real figure is 41 percent—double what it was 10 years ago. Millions of workers earn less than US\$150 a month, and 4 million people are living in conditions of extreme poverty, defined as less than US\$1 a day.

Some commentators see the mounting of the present strike by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATO) as part of a growing left-right split within the ANC. But this is a serious misrepresentation of the situation. COSATU, along with the South African Communist Party (SACP), is an integral partner in the ANC alliance. It is a supporter of the government and has never broken from it. Any differences between Mbeki and Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of COSATU, are of a tactical character—how best to defend the interests of big capital in the face of mass opposition.

Mbeki most directly articulates the demands of international finance capital and the transnational corporations. On June 13—the day of the sympathy strikes—he was opening the World Economic Forum in Cape Town, a global gathering of political and business leaders. COSATU and the SACP, while defending these same interests, also have to deal directly with the working class and therefore want to proceed with more caution.

The leadership of COSATU is acutely aware of the growing opposition to the government. There have been a growing number of industrial disputes in the recent period, including strikes by textile workers, public service employees, teachers, truck drivers and airport workers, and the first strike by gold miners in 18 years. COSATU has been forced to call a number of protest strikes and marches against government policies in the hope of letting off steam and heading off opposition to the ANC government's free-market programme.

COSATU also sees the present strike as a way of strengthening its own position within the ANC in the coming months, first at the ANC conference to be held later this month in preparation for the leadership election at the ANC five-yearly congress in December. The election of the next ANC president will determine who will become ANC candidate for the presidency in next year's election.

Along with the SACP, COSATU favours the candidacy of Jacob Zuma, the supposed “people's president,” who is no left-winger. Zuma was Mbeki's second in command until last year and has never opposed any of the government's pro-market privatisation policies.

In the course of the present strike, COSATU is attempting to demonstrate that it is the champion of the working class. But it is clear that it is not prepared to take on the government. On the eve of the mass action on June 13, COSATU abandoned the original demand for 12 percent without consultation and called for a 10 percent pay rise. The move was a gesture to the government that a sell-out was in the cards.



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