

South Africa: COSATU calls off public service strike

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The longest public service strike in South African history has been called off by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) after 28 days. The dispute began on June 1, when workers from 17 unions took all-out strike action in support of a demand for a wage increase of 12 percent across the board. The final settlement was for a 7.5 percent raise and increases in housing and health benefits.

Four teachers' unions, including the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), declared they were not prepared to accept the offer because it is far short of their demands. However, SADTU has suspended strike action until after the school holidays. Other unions also suspended the strike and said they had to consult their members. The offer will now be implemented across the whole public service sector.

The strike involved 700,000 workers—professional, skilled and unskilled. It received widespread support amongst the rest of the working class in South Africa. On June 13, hundreds of thousands of municipal workers took part in a one-day solidarity action in support of the strike. They included taxi and bus drivers, electricity and cleaning workers, and administrative workers from border posts and airports. On that day, all the major cities in South Africa were brought to a standstill because of mass demonstrations in support of the public service workers' strike.

During the course of the dispute, striking workers faced violence and intimidation from the forces of the state. Picket lines were repeatedly attacked by police using tear gas, rubber bullets, stun grenades and batons. Thousands of soldiers were deployed as strikebreakers in hospitals throughout the country. Armed soldiers were stationed outside hospitals and schools and near protest marches. More than 3,000 health service employees were declared to be "essential workers" by the government and sacked for breaking their contracts. There was a continuous campaign of vilification against the strikers from the media and from the ANC government.

By its own admission, the COSATU leadership had anticipated that the strike would be over much more quickly. On the 19th day of the strike, Zwelinzima Vavi, COSATU general secretary, told a conference of his organisation, "The strike continues...there is no sign that workers are getting tired; instead they getting angrier, they are getting more united. They are more resolved than at the beginning of the strike." He added that labour wanted the strike to end as soon as possible so that "normalcy" could return to the public services. He said he had never expected the strike to last 16

days.

It took 28 days for COSATU to hatch the final deal with the ANC government and secure a return to work. The result is hardly a success given that the annual rate of inflation in South Africa is now approximately 7 percent, mainly because of recent fuel price rises. Moreover, clauses were included that both government and COSATU leaders hope will undermine such united action in the future.

One of these is a proposed "career plan," a so-called "occupation specific dispensation," for certain sections of the public service. According to *IOL*, this will reward "good performance, qualifications and length of service" for these professionals. The intention of this plan is to separate the professional workers from other layers and to cause divisions between the professional workers themselves, leaving individuals to negotiate their own "reward."

Another clause establishes a framework for setting up a "minimum service agreement" with essential service workers. This will ensure that minimum services will be maintained during strikes. The 3,000 "emergency workers" who were sacked during this dispute have been reinstated with a final warning. But the new clause is an attempt to make future strike action null and void by resorting to the courts.

Under the agreement, the government will enforce the "no work, no pay" principle and deduct salary payments for days on strike over the next three months. Six days' pay will be deducted at a time, which, according to SADTU provincial secretary Jonovan Rustin, will leave some teachers "penniless."

The anger and frustration felt by workers in South Africa against the pro-market ANC government was clearly reflected in the length and militancy of this dispute. Statistics recently published by the South African *Mail & Guardian* show that in the first six months of this year, 11 million working days have been lost as a result of industrial action. This figure is already far higher than the previous year's record for days lost through strikes. In 1994, the figure was 3.9 million for the whole year, and there had been a steady decline until 2005 when the figure was 0.5 million days.

A recent survey conducted by COSATU's research department showed that between 1998 and 2002, workers' share of the national income dropped from 50 percent to less than 45 percent. During the same period, company profits rose from just less than 27 percent to 32 percent. The figures show that in 2006, executive pay rose by 34 percent, whilst in the same period, workers' wage

increases ran at between 1 and 2 percent above inflation. Other studies showed that the ratio of CEO pay to workers' pay is more than 50 to 1. The majority of families in South Africa live below the poverty line.

From 1994 to 2003, unemployment doubled in South Africa. The current real level of joblessness stands at between 37 and 41 percent. Living standards of many workers have been driven down as permanent full-time jobs have been replaced by casual, subcontracted jobs with low pay, no benefits and no job security. Sixty percent of workers in the building industry are employed on a temporary basis, as are 30 percent of workers in mining.

There has been no let-up in militancy following the return to work of the public service workers. Further strikes are imminent as workers from the chemical, petroleum, electricity and gold-mining industries prepare for industrial action over wages. On July 9, 260,000 metal and engineering unions took all-out strike action in support of a demand for wage increases of between 9 and 10 percent.

It was this new wave of strikes that made it essential for COSATU to call off the public service workers' strike when it did.

The strike has been seen by many as a show of strength ahead of the ANC congress to be held in December this year. Some observers have commented that the dispute was used by COSATU to put pressure on President Thabo Mbeki and the ANC over the selection of the candidate for the 2009 presidential elections.

On June 13, the BBC published an interview with Robert Schrire, head of politics at the University of Cape Town, in which he claimed that in organising the strike COSATU was posing the question, "Who is going to run the country?" Is it the faction around COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP) or that around Mbeki?

In fact, Vavi and the COSATU leadership were determined to prevent a direct confrontation with the government. In a press release addressed to the ANC policy conference held on June 27, the day before the public service strike was called off, COSATU praised the ANC as "the party of liberation," adding, "it represents [workers'] aspirations and hopes for a better life."

But there is resentment within the trade union bureaucracy that COSATU and the SACP, as partners in the ANC alliance, do not play a more central role in government. They feel left out in the cold by such policies as black economic empowerment, which enriches a small layer around Mbeki. They complain that they are not full partners in the government and cannot fully share in the spoils of power.

Despite the fact that there are no differences in principle between the opposing wings of the ANC, COSATU and the SACP are acutely aware of the social chasm opening up between the impoverished working class and the small select layer of super-rich and feel the need to deflect working class opposition.

Whilst they criticise government economic policies for defending the interests of the transnational corporations, they have no fundamental opposition to the profit system. It has been recently revealed that both COSATU and the SACP have made investments in the private health service whilst at the same time criticising the privatisation of the healthcare system.

In recent weeks, Mbeki has made it clear that he is willing to

serve for another term as president of the ANC, although the constitution does not allow him to stand again as president of South Africa. His intention is no doubt to ensure that his nominee is selected as candidate for the presidency of the country.

The presidential candidate favoured by COSATU and the SACP is Jacob Zuma, a man who has never opposed any of the government's pro-market policies. As deputy president, he was Mbeki's second-in-command from 1999 until he was deposed in 2005.

With his connections with the ANC's radical past and his rhetoric about fulfilling the aims of the ANC's Freedom Charter, Zuma provides a useful "left" figurehead to justify supporting the government and in this way head off mounting social and political opposition.

Zuma went to great lengths to distance himself from the public service workers' strike. On the day after the mass demonstrations in support of the public service workers' strike, he told Agence France-Presse, "I don't think it's doing any good for the country. I think that both parties should have found a solution before the strike."

He said that such scenes damaged the country's international reputation as it tries to cement its status as the continent's economic powerhouse and ahead of the 2010 World Cup. "I think it has not looked good for the country and these are matters that negotiators on both sides, labour and the government, should have taken into account."

Neither Zuma nor any of the other ANC candidates for the presidency has anything to offer the working people. The current strike wave has underlined the urgent need for the development of a new socialist political movement in the South African working class opposed not only to the ANC and all its factions, but its pro-capitalist government partners, the SACP and the COSATU leadership.



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