

South Africa: General strike against price rises

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A general strike brought the South African economy to a standstill on Wednesday. The South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU) called its two million members out on a one-day strike in protest of rising prices of food and fuel.

The strike call followed an announcement that electricity prices would increase by 27.5 percent.

Eyewitnesses described a sea of protesting workers marching through the streets of Pretoria to the office of the President Thabo Mbeki. Other marches took place in Durban, Cape Town, Ladysmith, Klerksdorp, Polokwane and Witbank.

Gold mines were closed, public transport stopped, and car plants shut down. AngloGold Ashanti, the world's third largest gold producer, said all its mines were closed for the day. "Our mining operations have been affected," said Alan Fine, "and no shafts are operating today."

The company would not say how much production had been lost.

Harmony, the world's fifth largest gold producer, said all its mines were hit by the strike.

National Union of Mineworkers spokesman Lesiba Seshoka told reporters, "In the Free State province all our branches are participating in the COSATU action and almost all the Harmony operations are shut down."

Harmony mines were also hit by a strike last week when workers held a day of mourning for a colleague who was killed. The two days of strike action are thought to have cost the company 60-70 kg of gold.

Anglo Platinum, the world's largest platinum miner, said that 71 percent of its workers were on strike. Impala Platinum, the world's second largest producer of the metal, reported 40 percent of its workers on strike.

Anglo American, the world's biggest mining company, said 55 percent of its workforce stayed away. But the company claimed that all its nine South African coalmines stayed open.

Daimler had to close its plant in East London. Ford shut down its operations in Port Elizabeth and Silverton for the

day. Volkswagen was forced to close its plant at Uithage, where 450 vehicles a day normally come off the line.

Services on Metrorail in Gauteng Province were paralysed by strike action hitting the financial centre of the South African economy in Johannesburg. The strike forced bus services in Johannesburg to halt. In Port Elizabeth there were no buses. Taxi services were off the road in many areas.

Construction sites ceased operations for the day. The construction of facilities for the 2012 World Cup came to a halt.

Clothing and textile workers responded to the strike call in large numbers. More than 100 clothing firms were reported closed. The South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union reported that 93 percent of its members had heeded the strike call.

Schools were closed in many areas as teachers joined the strike.

Shops closed in the many of the big cities, and roads were closed because of the protest marches. Shoprite, one of the major stores, stayed open in Durban with only a skeleton staff.

The national strike follows three provincial strikes in recent weeks against rising prices.

The massive response to the strike call reflects the enormous anger in the working class at rising prices and a government that is indifferent to the needs of the mass of the population. Food prices have increased by 17 percent, interest rates by 20 percent and fuel prices by more than 35 percent over the last year. But pay has only risen by 12 percent over the same period.

If those who work are badly hit by these price rises, then the estimated 40 percent of the 48 million population of South Africa who are unemployed are being driven into deeper poverty.

Earlier this year mines were forced to close because of power shortages. Workers in the mining sector fear that the power shortage may result in job losses.

For the past five years economic growth has averaged 5

percent per annum, but it fell to less than 3 percent last year. Unemployment is bound to rise further as growth weakens.

Faced with mounting anger among its members COSATU had little choice but to step up their strike action and take it on to a national level. The unions are attempting to divert the legitimate anger of their members into a campaign to support Jacob Zuma, the new African National Congress president. Protestors in Cape Town sang “Umshini Wami,” “Bring Me My Machine Gun,” the song associated with Zuma.

COSATU is peddling the illusion that an ANC government under Zuma would be different to an ANC government under Mbeki. The reality is that Zuma was Mbeki’s Deputy President from 1999 to 2005. Zuma was in the government when it set out its plans to privatise Eskom, the South African electricity generator. It was unable to carry this through because the corporate sector realised that its decrepit infrastructure would have prevented them from making a profit.

The government of which Zuma was a member continued to follow International Monetary Fund directives to cut funding to the public sector. Eskom’s already ancient infrastructure has not been renewed as a result, leading to the breakdown in supply. The 27 percent increase in charges is a direct outcome of this situation. It is intended to finance the repairs that the government refused to fund.

Zuma is up to his neck in the free market measures that led to the present hike in electricity prices. Since he began his campaign to oust Mbeki, he has taken every opportunity to make it clear to international investors that he will continue those policies while using populist rhetoric at home.

COSATU has worked in close alliance with the government ever since it came to power. The trade union bureaucracy shares responsibility for the plight of the majority of ordinary South Africans who face a serious assault on their living conditions. On every occasion when anger has mounted, they have diverted popular anger into protests and one-day strikes. The unions have nothing to offer the many workers who are unemployed or the rural poor.

The South African Communist Party (SACP) has given its support to Zuma and the protests over rising prices. But it too supported the ANC government from its inception. It bears a shared responsibility for the impact of the government’s free market measures. COSATU, the SACP and the ANC have acted in alliance together against the interests of the mass of the South African population.

The disputes that have arisen within this ruling coalition reflect the bitter rivalries between sections of the black middle class and bourgeoisie who want to enrich themselves. COSATU, the SACP and Zuma are prepared to use popular anger as a vehicle to unseat Mbeki’s faction and put

themselves in a position of power. But their own policies are no different from those that Mbeki has pursued.

COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi was talking tough when he addressed the strikers in Cape Town.

“Should a single worker lose a job, the ministers will have to go.” Vavi said, “They are making us pay for mistakes committed by other fellows.”

But Vavi boasted to *The Sowetan* that COSATU had succeeded in getting the electricity price rise reduced.

“Were it not for our engagement with the ANC,” Vavi claimed, “the country would be paying a whopping 60 percent more for electricity now. COSATU led the struggle against this increase and now we will pay 27 percent. That’s progress.”

COSATU met with ministers in May for an alliance summit on the electricity crisis. Vavi claimed that ministers agreed to a series of social measures including cuts in sales tax, increasing social grants and food vouchers for the poor.

“All of a sudden you have the president and minister of finance going public to say those things will not happen.”

The 27 percent increase in fuel charges was, as Vavi admits, an outcome of that summit meeting. In return COSATU won a few minor concessions that were withdrawn almost immediately. Vavi now presents COSATU’s alliance with the government as a positive influence and his own part in achieving a massive price hike as a victory.

Workers’ anger at the price rises was expressed very clearly in the general strike, but they will not succeed in defending themselves as long as they are tied to leaders like Vavi and the trade union movement.



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