

South Africa: Riot police attack World Cup stewards pay protests

Robert Stevens
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South African riot police responded to protests by thousands of stewards at the soccer World Cup, with tear gas attacks and rubber bullets.

The first police operation began on Sunday evening when around 500 stewards entered the Moses Mabhida stadium in Durban, three hours after the game between Germany and Australia. The stewards were demanding the payment of the 1,500 rand (US\$197) a day they were promised. They were only paid about one eighth of that—190 rand (US\$25).

At around 3 a.m., following initial negotiations over pay, about 80 of the stewards refused to leave the stadium. Riot police then set off two percussive grenades in an attempt to force the workers to leave the parking lot under the stadium. Once the workers had been forcibly removed, they were again attacked with teargas and rubber bullets in the areas immediately outside the stadium. Several people were injured, with one woman badly hurt after being shot. The operation continued later as up to 100 police surrounded a group of 300 protesters near the stadium, separating the men from the women.

The following day, the protests spread to Cape Town as some 80 stewards attempted to strike at the Green Point stadium prior to the evening Italy-Paraguay game. The workers were confronted by at least 100 riot police who forcibly removed them. One steward was severely hurt, according to reports. World Cup organisers drafted in 1,500 national police trainees to take over security for the game, which resulted in many supporters having to wait in long queues before being allowed into the stadium.

One of the stewards, speaking anonymously, told the Associated Press, “They were supposed to give us 1,500 rand, that’s what FIFA [International Federation of Association Football] told us, and they gave us 190.

We are working from 12 o’clock until now.”

Even after police had fired teargas and used rubber bullets against the workers, Rich Mkhondo, spokesman for the South Africa organising committee, claimed that the dispute was one to be resolved between the stewards and their employers, Stallion Security Consortium. “We don’t get involved on what an employer pays their employees”, said Mkhondo. Games at the Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban, Cape Town Stadium and Soccer City and Ellis Park stadiums in Johannesburg will all now be stewarded by the police.

The protests continued Tuesday when hundreds of stewards began a strike outside Ellis Park ahead of the evening game between Brazil and North Korea. According to an AP report, more than 2,000 stewards began the strike at 12:30 p.m. A worker said that since they began work on May 27, their pay had been falling. For a 10-hour working day the company was offering staff just 190 rand (US\$25). He said that he would not accept this and would work for 500 rand (US\$65).

In Durban, around 2,000 stewards protested to demand that payments be increased. Some 150 workers marched from the Moses Mabhida Stadium, where Spain and Switzerland are due to play Wednesday, to a rally near the town’s railroad.

Some of the Durban protesters held placards reading, “We need our money, then we can feel it”. This was a play on the slogan created for the South Africa 2010 event, “Feel It, It Is Here”.

More workers joined the demonstration before they marched back to the stadium area, with a helicopter hovering overhead. They were met by dozens of police and moved into a fenced-off field. According to a *Mail and Guardian* report, “The guards [stewards] ignored forms they were asked to sign to give an undertaking

that they would not withdraw their labour again during the World Cup.”

Another report said that the police had water cannon on standby and that some of those who turned up were told they had incorrect papers and turned away. AP reported that most of the demonstrators left after a couple of hours, after being paid just 205 rand (US\$26.50) in exchange for handing in their World Cup accreditations and uniforms.

Workers are concerned that they have been effectively sacked, as the police are now in charge of stewarding. Many of the stewards had signed contracts to work for three months. Reuters quoted a female security guard who participated in the Durban protest. She said, “They just told us that our jobs have been taken by the police. We signed a contract for three months. I want to get a straight answer about whether our jobs are still here.”

One of the protest leaders, Sibusiso Mthethwa, said, “We want people of FIFA to confirm our earnings because Stallion has robbed us”.

The South African Transport and Allied Workers Union stated in the mildest of terms that it would “gather more information, so we can attempt to engage FIFA and the local organising committee and find a solution”. Union coordinator Mzwandile Jackson Simon said, “I don’t think police will manage on their own.”

The police operation will be stepped up this week, with extra forces being sent to Durban on Wednesday when Spain and Switzerland play in the city.

In another dispute, bus drivers in Johannesburg took wildcat action Monday. The drivers said they had not been given enough notice that they would be expected to work longer hours during the tournament. As a result, several hundred football fans were left stranded after the Netherlands-Denmark game in the “Soccer City” area of Johannesburg. The drivers returned to work the following day after an agreement was reached between their employers, Clidet, and the South African Municipal Workers Union.

The violent crackdown on the stewards reveals the brutal reality behind the carefully crafted corporate mantra of the World Cup organisers: that the hosting of the tournament has “united” all South Africans. Rather, those who are lucky enough to get a temporary job

stewarding for a few weeks are being paid a pittance, and protests are met with immediate, state-sanctioned police violence.

Danny Jordaan, the chief executive of the World Cup organising committee, warned that any further action would be subject to crackdowns. “Although we have respect for workers’ rights, we find it unacceptable for them to disrupt match-day proceedings and will not hesitate to take action in such instances,” he said.



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