

Class struggle erupts in South Africa

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The strike by 1.3 million public service workers in South Africa represents a significant escalation of the international class struggle in response to the global recession and the austerity measures that governments have adopted worldwide. It expresses the fundamental contradiction that exists between the interests of working people and all governments that defend the capitalist system.

This is demonstrated sharply in the case of the African National Congress (ANC), which came to power with the support of a popular mass movement.

No government has enjoyed such an extended period of good will as the ANC since it came to office in 1994 under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, ending the apartheid system and promising to create a “Rainbow Nation” in which the entire population shared the economic benefits of the mineral-rich country. Instead, the division between rich and poor has widened, while a tiny layer of businessmen associated with the ANC have become millionaires. “Black Economic Empowerment” has left the majority of the government’s supporters living in townships and rural areas that lack even the most essential amenities.

Class tensions have been developing for several years, while the ANC pursued free market policies that resulted in mounting unemployment and failed to meet the needs of the mass of the population. President Jacob Zuma ousted Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki, promising to provide jobs, housing and services. But he has continued the same pro-business policies, resulting in growing disillusionment and the anger that has broken out in the present strike action.

What began as a dispute that formed part of the regular annual pay round, with civil servants, teachers and hospital workers demanding a pay rise and allowances in line with those won by other sections of workers, now threatens to bring the South African economy to a standstill. Miners and other industrial

workers are taking solidarity action. The strike is already said to be costing 1 billion rand, or \$135.5 million a day.

The strike has brought the working class into direct conflict with the ANC government and the South African state, with police using rubber bullets and water cannon against strikers, the courts banning sections of workers from joining the strike, and the army deployed in hospitals. The government and a supportive media have launched a campaign of vilification against the strikers. Government ministers have accused hospital workers of “murder.”

The government is determined to break the strike and make an example of the public service workers. The action has taken on a political dimension that is recognised by the government, which sees that its credibility is at stake.

Opposition politicians from the Democratic Alliance are demanding to know whether the government or the unions are running South Africa. But more fundamental still, the global banks and speculators are watching to see whether the ANC has the necessary resolve to deal decisively with the working class.

What the ruling elite fear is that the majority of the population, who are not organised in unions, may begin to mobilise and that a mass insurgency like that which brought about the end of apartheid may erupt. Some 50 percent of young people are unemployed. The official unemployment level is 30 percent and the real rate is probably more like 40 percent. The conditions exist for a social explosion and a prolonged public sector strike may ignite it.

Union leaders like Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi have made a point of criticising government ministers and have employed their most left-wing rhetoric in an attempt to retain leadership of the strike. They are conscious of the level of anger

among their members and desperate to bring the strike to a conclusion before it gets out of their control. They delayed the strike until after the World Cup and initially recommended that the public service workers accept the government's offer. Desperate for talks at the highest level, they have appealed to Zuma to return from his trip to China so that they can negotiate with him.

COSATU's opposition to the government is rhetorical. It remains part of the tripartite alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) that has sustained the government in power for the past decade and a half. South African workers have won formal parliamentary democracy, but there is nothing genuinely democratic about a government that puts the defence of profits before the right of workers to a decent standard of living.

Deep fissures are opening up in the South African national movement, as fundamental class conflicts reemerge with immense force under the impact of the global failure of the capitalist system. These can only widen, as the government attempts to carry out the demands of the international markets and compete with other emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India and China. Increasingly, South African workers will come into conflict with their own trade union leaders and the SACP, who will insist that the tripartite alliance be maintained.

The presence of COSATU and the SACP in the governing coalition has helped to maintain the fiction that the ANC is in some sense an organisation that reflects the interests of working people. It is a bourgeois nationalist movement that defends the interests of the capitalist class. Its founding charter explicitly states its intention of creating a capitalist South Africa—in which black businessmen can take part in exploiting the working class alongside their white counterparts—and that is precisely what it has done and continues to do.

The SACP gave the ANC a left cover by claiming that socialism could be achieved in South Africa only through a two-stage process, in which majority rule was attained first. At a later stage, the Stalinist SACP claimed, it would be possible to begin the struggle for socialism. Workers therefore had to subordinate their class interests to the national struggle until there was a democratic state.

The Stalinists condemned the Marxist programme of Permanent Revolution, which insists on the working class organising its own independent revolutionary movement and securing its leadership of the peasant masses in opposition to the national bourgeoisie on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme. As Leon Trotsky insisted, the democratic tasks that confront oppressed countries like South Africa can be resolved only in the course of a socialist revolution and the establishment of a workers' state.

The eruption of open class struggle in South Africa, the pitting of millions of workers against the bourgeois nationalist ANC government, demonstrates conclusively that the only way to complete the democratic revolution and resolve deep-seated questions such as the distribution of land and the provision of essential services is through the overthrow of the profit system and the organization of production on the basis of social need, not profit.

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