

South Africa: ANC government uses police, army and courts against strikers

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23 August 2010

Strikers at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto and Helen Joseph Hospital in Johannesburg were attacked by South African police using water cannon and rubber bullets last week. On Saturday, the government won an injunction banning the strike by civil servants and insisting they return to work immediately. The government says that it will impose a settlement on the civil servants if they refuse. Military personnel have been drafted into the hospitals.

The strike by more than a million South African civil servants, including hospital workers, teachers, customs officials, government clerical officers, court staff, police and prison staff, has brought workers into direct collision with the government and their own trade unions, which are part of the tripartite alliance with the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party. Union leaders delayed the civil servants' annual pay claim until after the World Cup in deference to the wishes of the government. Now that the international spotlight is off South Africa, the civil servants have been subjected to state violence, even though their 8.6 percent pay claim is comparable to that which other sectors have already won.

Media reports have vilified the strikers, and government ministers have used deliberately inflammatory language. Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi accused the strikers of "murder". He asked, "We have demonstrated our humanity during the World Cup. Why now are people losing their humanity and prepared to murder?"

Labour Minister Membathisi Mdladlana denounced the strikers as violent and accused them of bringing "trade unionism" into disrepute. "Intimidation only demonises, satanises and destroys the genuine struggle of the workers," he said.

Government spokesman Themba Maseko insisted

that the government would not meet the civil servants' pay claim. "The days of spending money as though it is unlimited are essentially over," he said.

The government is determined to break this strike. The unions have assisted them in doing so by postponing action until the state could concentrate its forces in a massive display of power designed to intimidate the entire working class.

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu of the University of Johannesburg said that the strike was more than an industrial dispute: "It is a political testing of strength in which Zuma can't be seen to be weak."

President Zuma and the ANC government intend to make an example of the civil servants. Zuma must convince international investors and the markets that his government can control the working class and impose the kind of austerity measures that governments around the world have implemented. South Africa's deficit is currently 6.7 percent of gross domestic product. Recent pay deals and the continuing demand for essential services to be provided in the townships has cast doubt on Zuma's ability to drive down public spending and increase the level of exploitation in South Africa.

In June, workers at the state-owned electricity generator Eskom won a nine percent wage increase and a 1,500 rand housing allowance, after they threatened to turn the lights out during the World Cup. Transnet workers, who run the state-owned freight train network, pipelines and ports, won a nine percent rise in May after they struck for 18 days halting exports. Auto workers have just won a 10 percent pay rise this year, with nine percent next year and the extension of pension rights to contract workers.

Chris Thexton, chairman of the automotive employers' group, warned, "It's become a trend, not

necessarily a good one from an economic point of view, for settlements in the double-digit region, and that's way above inflation."

The automotive industry is the largest manufacturing export sector and accounts for six percent of South Africa's gross domestic product. BMW alone lost 2,000 vehicles during the strike. All the major car companies will have difficulty reaching their export targets this year because of the closure.

A GM spokesperson said "Industrial action like this affects the viability of the industry."

His words were as much a warning to Zuma as to the trade unions who brought him to power, first as leader of the ANC and then as president in 2009. Initially, Zuma's rise alarmed investors because of his militant rhetoric. He soon allayed their fears and showed that his reputation for militancy and strong backing in the unions would allow him to suppress the class struggle more effectively. Zuma has continued the free market policies of his predecessor, Thabo Mbeki, and the gulf between rich and poor has continued to widen.

General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Zwelinzima Vavi, has made some rhetorical feints at Zuma in the course of the civil servants strike. Speaking to public employees who rallied outside parliament on Tuesday, he pointed to the disparity between the Zuma's pay and that of other public servants. "If my memory serves me right he is earning more than R2.2m," Vavi said. "He has blood like we have blood. He has a big family like we do. He has children to feed like we do. Our needs are the same. We want geld (money). Ons soek geld (we want money)."

A teacher attending the rally told reporters, "As teachers we cannot afford to school our own children. I can't pay for medical aid. We can't afford to keep our children."

As civil servants shouted "Down with the fat cats," another worker said, "If they won't listen we are going to ungovern this government."

But Vavi has no interest in fighting for the interests of his members. He is part of the wealthy elite that governs South Africa. He was instrumental in bringing Zuma to power and preventing a break from the ANC, as opposition mounted in the working class during the leadership of Mbeki. Zuma came to power promising health care, housing and services for all. Those

promises have proved to be empty. Vavi knows that COSATU cannot appear to be the government's lapdog, or it will lose all credibility.

But had COSATU wished to make the civil servants' case forcefully, it would not have delayed their claim until after the World Cup. Nor would they have settled the automotive dispute so quickly. Getting the auto workers back to work has taken the pressure off the government and allowed them to focus their attention on a section of workers with less economic muscle.

Both COSATU and the SACP are working overtime to stop the civil servants' strike. The SACP called on all those involved to immediately end the strike. Top COSATU leaders are in talks with government ministers.

"We are working very hard to find a political solution to resolve the impasse," COSATU president Sdumo Dlamini told the *South African Mail and Guardian*. "We are engaging every high office in the country to find a political solution."

The unions intend to close down the strike as soon as possible because it threatens both the international credibility of the government and the survival of the tripartite alliance between COSATU, the SACP and the ANC. They fear that the comparatively small proportion of workers who are members of unions will unite in a political struggle with the vast majority of the population who are not unionised.

Some 900,000 jobs were lost this year as a result of the recession and unemployment is running officially at over 25 percent. It may be closer to 40 percent. Among black South Africans, the official figure is 30 percent and half of 15- to 24-year-olds are out of work. The trade unions and the SACP have facilitated a massive loss of jobs in the mining sector and are set to do the same in the auto industry as the ANC government attempts to make the South African economy competitive in the world market.



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