

More than one million public workers strike in South Africa

Hiram Lee
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More than one million public workers went out on strike Wednesday in South Africa demanding higher wages. Strikers, including large numbers of teachers and workers in the health care industry, gathered in protests outside the country's hospitals, schools and government buildings.

As many as 90 percent of unionized public workers are said to have joined the strike. The walkouts are expected to continue on Thursday with workers threatening to block major highways into Johannesburg.

Workers are rejecting a proposed 7 percent wage increase and are instead demanding an 8.6 percent increase. The government had agreed after four days of negotiations that preceded the strike to raise public workers' monthly housing allotment to 700 rand, up from the current 630 rand, but the number was rejected as inadequate. Public workers are demanding at least 1,000 rand for housing.

While workers are asking for a living wage and affordable housing, they are being told there is no money available to provide for their needs. At a press conference, Public Services Minister Richard Baloyi declared, "As government, as the employer, we have indicated and demonstrated for all to see that our capacity to afford is actually exhausted."

Baloyi claims that to meet the demands of the public sector workers, the South African government would be forced to go over budget by 5 billion rand (or \$690 million US). His comments are part of a campaign by President Jacob Zuma's government to vilify the striking workers and stamp out support from other sections of the workforce by claiming concessions made to public workers would force the government to cut funds elsewhere.

Tensions have been mounting among public sector

workers for some time. Last week, tens of thousands of public workers marched through the streets of Cape Town and Pretoria carrying signs that read "We demand a living wage." The average teacher in South Africa makes a total of just \$15,000 US per year.

Speaking with the BBC's Network Africa during that strike, Patrick Craven, spokesman for the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), rejected the government's claims that there is no money for workers. COSATU, a labor coalition of 21 separate trade unions representing some 1.8 million workers in all, retains a leading role in the current strike.

"We believe money is available. There have been stories recently of the government spending huge amounts of money on World Cup tickets for their senior managers, on five-star accommodation for government ministers," Craven said. "We simply do not accept that, given the importance of paying public servants a decent wage, money cannot be found from the huge amounts the government has at its disposal."

However, COSATU presents no challenge to the profit system. Despite its protests against certain policies of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), it shares responsibility for years of privatizations, massive cuts in social spending and reductions in the wages of the public sector workers who it now claims to defend. Even as it poses as a "left" critic of the government, COSATU remains in political alliance with both the ANC and the South African Communist Party.

In 2007, as many as 700,000 public sector workers took part in a strike which lasted nearly one month, making it the longest strike among public service workers in the country's history. Strikers, who found wide support among the South African working class, faced intimidation and violence from soldiers and

police mobilized by the ANC to suppress the strike. COSATU called an end to that strike action after 28 days, accepting at that time a 7.5 percent wage increase even though striking workers had demanded 12 percent.

Just as it has during the previous struggles of civil servants, COSATU will again attempt to keep the militancy of striking workers contained and diverted from presenting a real challenge to the prevailing social order.



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