International lessons of the South African public service strike

Ann Talbot
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Union leaders were chased out of a meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, when they told striking public service workers that their three-week strike was over. This event was an important expression of the sharpening conflict internationally between the working class and the trade union apparatuses.

The South African public service unions have accepted a government pay offer that is half of a percent more than the workers were offered at the beginning of the strike. They are attempting to impose the deal on their members after a protracted struggle in which workers have faced attacks from the police, the deployment of armed soldiers in the hospitals, and court orders against the strike.

"Members are angry, and they want to protest by going to the national office to burn their membership cards," Ndiitwani Ramarumo, a member of the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), told reporters after the meeting.

One union official who did not wish to be named said, "We are facing a serious backlash from our members who object to the union leadership's decision to suspend the strike."

"Many say we have sold them a dud," the official continued.

Unions suspended the strike as the wave of militancy threatened to spread to other sections of workers. National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) members are striking in support of a 15 percent wage demand. They marched through Port Elizabeth on Thursday to present a memorandum to the Retail Motor Industry and the Fuel Retailers Association.

Platinum miners who are members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) have been on strike since August 23.

Even sections of the police and army discussed the possibility of joining the public service workers' strike. They were prevented from doing so only when the government won court orders blocking their participation.

What began as a series of strikes associated with the annual wage round has rapidly escalated into a movement that expresses the pent-up class tensions in South African society. The unions acted in order to prevent the strike by 1.3 million public service workers becoming the focus of a general strike. Such a movement would connect with the social discontent of the many unorganised workers in the townships, who have been protesting with increasing frequency at the failure of the government to provide essential services.

The unions moved with great haste to close down the strike when it became clear that the government could not halt it by means of a campaign of vilification in the press and repression on the streets. They have acted throughout as the main prop of the African National Congress (ANC) government during this crisis.

The Confederation of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) was against the strike from the beginning. It was delayed until after the World Cup so as not to embarrass the government and COSATU only reluctantly supported it when the smaller union federation, the Independent Labour Congress, was obliged to take action because of the anger of its members.

COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi resorted to his most left-wing rhetoric only in an attempt to maintain control of the strike. He denounced government ministers and threatened to withdraw union support for President Jacob Zuma in the local elections next year. He highlighted the way in which Zuma's son, Duduzan Zuma, has benefited from a partnership deal with ArcelorMittal, and pointed to the emergence of "a predatory elite" within the ANC, as a layer of wealthy businessmen has been created by the programme of Black Economic Empowerment.

Vavi's rhetoric succeeded in keeping COSATU at the head of the strike, a position it then used to call it off.

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Angry and frustrated though they are, many workers are returning to their jobs.

This betrayal underscores the universal role of the official trade unions as opponents of the class struggle and agencies of the employers and the state in imposing attacks on their members.

The entire thrust of COSATU's policy and that of the South African Communist Party is to foster the illusion that their governmental partner, the ANC, retains a progressive character. The unions have been closely tied to the ANC ever since its previous struggle against apartheid. But the progressive coloration given to this relationship has been thoroughly exposed since the coming to power of the bourgeois nationalist ANC.

While the ANC was at the head of the movement against apartheid, it could be presented as a champion of working people even though its programme was explicitly capitalist. Now that it is in power and struggling to develop a successful capitalist economy, the essential conflict between it and the working class has erupted in an acute form.

It is not merely a question of personal "corruption" that Zuma's son or other leading members of the political elite benefit from deals with foreign companies. It expresses rather the relationship between the new black bourgeoisie represented by the ANC and world imperialism.

For its part, the union bureaucracy, through its role in government and its close relations with management, occupies a position of enormous privilege, which it is determined to defend at all costs against the threat from below. As the career of former mine workers union and COSATU leader Cyril Ramaphosa makes clear, not a few have successfully traded a union position and close relations with the Stalinists for high political office in the ANC and a lucrative career in business.

The International Socialists, the South African magazine *Amandla* and other middle-class political groups have declared that the government's offer represented a retreat and even a partial victory for the workers. They criticise the leaders of COSATU for this misstep or that mistake, a wrong tactic here or too cautious an approach there. They even go so far as to say that calling off the strike was "scandalous."

But essentially they believe, and want workers to believe, that the unions can be resurrected and are the only organisations that have a right to lead the working class. That means maintaining the subordination of the working class to the ANC through a fruitless search for some faction or tendency that can be presented as progressive and potentially representing the interests of workers.

COSATU's record in this strike is a testament to the character of trade unionism itself. The nominally most "militant" trade union federation in the world has aligned itself with the representatives of capital against the working class in the course of a strike that brought more than a million workers into collision with the forces of the state. This was an experience of international significance for the working class.

For the last several decades, as the world economy has become increasingly integrated, unions have been unable to win even modest reforms or improvements in the social conditions of the working class. The few more skilled workers who have won a wage rise of a few percentage points above the official rate of inflation will see even this eroded over time.

For the vast majority of the working class, the trade unions have no relevance at all. The bureaucracy is supremely indifferent to the suffering, worsening social conditions and rising unemployment that is the workers' lot. Instead, the unions act as partners with governments to impose further austerity measures so the major banks and corporations can maintain their profits in the midst of the global economic crisis.

Workers and young people internationally must draw serious lessons from the experience of the South African public service strike. It highlights the urgent necessity of making a political break from the unions and building new organisations of class struggle and a new political leadership on the basis of an international socialist perspective.

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