

South African unions attempt to impose settlement on striking public service workers

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Trade unions representing South African public service workers are attempting to impose a settlement on their members. The three-week strike by 1.3 million teachers, hospital workers and civil servants ended on Monday when unions instructed the strikers to return to work pending further discussions.

But public service workers have expressed their opposition to the deal that is on offer. One striking teacher who wished to remain anonymous said, “Our leaders are sell-outs, we don’t want to accept the agreement”.

“Unions were shocked by the manner of the rejections”, a union official told reporters, “the mandate was unambiguous, it was a no”. The dispute has reached an impasse as workers are brought into conflict with organisations they thought of as their own.

Members of public service unions affiliated to the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Independent Labour Congress (ILC) are demanding an 8.6 percent pay rise and a R1,000 per month housing allowance. The government offered 7.5 percent and a R800 housing allowance at the beginning of the strike. The new deal is the same as the government’s initial offer in all essentials.

The government has made it clear that it intends to pursue the strikers and punish them by docking their pay. Already facing the loss of three weeks income, the public service workers cannot afford to accept the offer that they rejected at the beginning of their strike.

The new deal was in fact drafted by the strikers’ own unions. They presented it to the government last week and then announced that the strike would be suspended on Monday for three weeks of further talks. As government spokesman Themba Maseko made clear, the three-week period is not intended to allow further negotiations between the unions and the government.

“The 21 days is for unions to consult their members and explain the offer. We want to resolve this matter as soon

as possible and hope to hear from the unions before the 21 days”.

Unions and government are agreed on the offer. The general secretary of COSATU, Zwelinzima Vavi, insisted, “This is the best deal we can get”.

Vavi has spent the last three weeks making speeches in which he denounced the government leaders for their high-rolling lifestyle. But he represents a union federation that is in alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) and is a vital prop to the government of President Jacob Zuma. His left-wing rhetoric kept him at the head of a strike movement whose anger and militancy has startled both the union leaders and the government. He is now attempting to bring the strike to an end and impose the government’s terms on his members. This brings the public service workers into direct collision with their own unions.

For three weeks they have faced attacks from the police, who have assaulted strikers with water cannon, rubber bullets and stun grenades. They have been vilified as “murderers” in the press. The military have been drafted into hospitals, while the courts have prevented some sections of public service workers from joining the strike. Now the public service workers find themselves in a confrontation with organisations that claim to represent the interests of the workers themselves.

It is a revealing expression of the state of class relations in South Africa that such a situation has developed. The public service workers strike demonstrates that the interests of working people and the unions are in complete opposition. As far as the unions are concerned, the main task is to get their members back to work. Their loyalty lies with a government that is intent on cutting its deficit, which is currently running at 6.7 percent of gross domestic product. Accepting the public service pay demand would put an extra 1 percent on state spending. That, and not their members’ living standards or the

provision of public services, is the main concern for the unions.

The public service strike is costing a billion rand a day and has resulted in the loss of 12 million working days. Government attempts to force their employees back to work have failed. COSATU has now taken the lead by imposing a settlement and unilaterally bringing the strike to an end against the objections of the workforce.

COSATU is well aware that other sections of workers are planning action. Platinum miners and car workers are set to strike. Automotive retail, filling station and parts workers have been on strike since the beginning of September demanding a 15 percent rise. The public service strike brings the total number of days lost in strikes this year to 13.25 million, which is more than four times the total for 2009. Halting this strike wave has become a priority for COSATU.

Overseas investors are becoming increasingly concerned at the escalation of working class protest. "Overall wage settlements in South Africa are not only divorced from inflation but more importantly productivity", Peter Attard Montalto of Nomura Plc told reporters. "The government is clearly setting a bad example to the rest of the economy. The inflationary effects should start to come through from the first quarter of next year".

At the root of the anger expressed in these strikes is the widening gulf between rich and poor in South Africa. Social inequality has increased since the ending of apartheid in 1994, as South Africa has opened up to the world market and a new layer of rich businessmen has emerged from the ANC hierarchy. Recent protests in the townships have highlighted the crisis in service provision.

Public services have been severely neglected and starved of investment. Total health care spending is 8 percent of GDP, but only 3 percent of that is accounted for by the public health care system. Public hospitals are currently running 40 percent short of staff. Skilled health workers get better pay in the private sector, which is used by the wealthy elite. The majority of the population depend on the underfunded, undermanned public facilities. As a result the infant mortality rate in South Africa is comparable to that in Ivory Coast, Kazakhstan or Cambodia, and it is increasing.

The public schools are in a similar condition. Schoolbooks were free to those children who could attend school under apartheid. But now parents have to pay for them and find money for school fees under the free-

market philosophy adopted by the ANC government.

A recent Deloitte survey found that the rich in South Africa were among the people least affected by the global financial crisis in 2010. By contrast, underpaid public service workers now face rising levels of personal debt and are struggling to afford housing. Hence their outpouring of anger.

COSATU was forced to put itself at the head of the strike when the smaller ILC threatened strike action in response to the demands of its members. The union leaders' intention throughout has been to let off steam and then call a halt to the strike. Recognising the reluctance of the union to support the strike in the first place, the government has taken an intransigent attitude and has used every weapon at its disposal to break the strike. The forces of the state and the media have been mobilised against the public service workers.

The ILC has always had a large proportion of white-collar members. But now almost a third of COSATU'S members have degrees. This layer of workers has been particularly badly hit by the neo-liberal policies of a government they once supported. The strike expresses the disintegration of the social base of the ANC under the impact of the global financial crisis.

Zuma came to power promising to provide jobs and services. But his record has been one of job losses and a further deterioration in the social conditions of the mass of the population. The public service strike and the continuing wave of strikes in other industries express this deep-lying anger with the inequitable social relations that have continued to develop under Zuma's regime. It is a strike with the most profound political implications and expresses in an acute form the need for working people to break with the nationalism of the ANC and build their own political party on the basis of an international socialist perspective.



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