

State repression stepped up as strike wave grows in South Africa

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Police prevented striking South African engineering workers from laying a case against them at a Gauteng court last week. Workers were blocked from entering the court building, where they intended to take legal action against police brutality. Castro Ngobese, a National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) official, complained: “Police were hostile and began bullying our members when they went to open a case.”

The engineering workers are in the second week of a strike calling for a 13 percent pay rise. From the beginning, the strike has been marked by repressive violence from the state and the employers.

One striker was killed when he was struck by a car during a protest. The supervisor of a strike-hit plant at Krugersdorp, west of Johannesburg, shot two workers at the factory gates. Police opened fire on strikers in Bellville, Cape Town, and Germiston, west of Johannesburg. Rubbers bullets have been used in a number of incidents, and press coverage shows police savagely beating striking workers. At least six NUMSA members have been hospitalised after being hit by rubber bullets in Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

The violence is indicative of growing class tensions. It has not been confined to police treatment of strikers. Armed police broke up what they claimed was an illegal taxi rank in Twshane. They ordered passengers out of the cabs and 27 vehicles were towed away. A police spokesman said, “We are cleaning up the city.”

Under the new Criminal Procedures Act, police will have the right to use “deadly force” against a suspect who resists arrest or attempts to flee. They will also be allowed to use force if they believe there is a threat of “future death”. Such sweeping powers will give police a free hand against protests and strikes. The law is drafted in the vaguest possible terms. It will allow police to open fire in a wide variety of circumstances.

The law also reduces the ability of the media to report

police actions. A new Media Appeals Tribunal will be established. It comes after a number of cases of police corruption and the existence of a hit squad have been exposed in the press.

The response of the Confederation of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) to the escalating violence against its members has been to call on them respect property and protest peacefully. Ngobese insisted that he had condemned violence by the strikers, and that “some elements” had hijacked the strike and were responsible for acts of violence. The union leaders are washing their hands of the hundreds of workers who have defended themselves against police violence and have been arrested while attempting to picket their workplaces.

COSATU is part of the tripartite alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC) which underpins the government. With them, it defends South African capitalism and regards the task of the unions to be regulating the wage negotiation process and ensuring that, when they cannot be avoided, strikes are short lived.

Nonetheless, economist Chris Hart expressed the concerns of the South African ruling elite by warning that strikes have now become routine. “The violence,” he warned, “suggests that there is a lack of control which is not good for investment.”

NUMSA has come under increasing pressure to get the 100,000 members back to work, as a strike wave has spread throughout the country. A strike by 70,000 workers in the petroleum and chemical industry has closed filling stations in the Johannesburg area as fuel supplies run dry. They have succeeded in halting deliveries to gas stations. “The industry is critical to the economy,” Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant said.

A spokesman for Total South Africa said “things are looking uncomfortable.”

Striking refinery and metalworkers have been joined by members of the Metal and Electrical Workers' Union (Mewusa), the United Association of South Africa (Uasa), Solidarity, the General Industries Workers Union of SA (Giwusa) and the South African Equity Workers' Association (Saewa). They are demanding pay increases of between 11 and 13 percent. Employers have so far offered between 4.1 and 7 percent.

The strike is set to spread to the mining industry. Coal, gold and platinum mining will be hit. A dispute has already been declared at Anglo Platinum. Lesiba Seshoka, spokesman for the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), said "We expect to see a strike throughout South Africa's mining industry." There has not been a nationwide strike in the mining sector since 2005, but one looks increasingly likely this year.

Municipal services could be hit next week, if the South African Municipal Workers (Samwu) reject local government wage offers, while the Food and Allied Workers union and the SA Democratic Teachers' Union are also threatening action.

The strike wave has not yet reached the proportions of last year's strikes by 1.3 million public sector workers. But the aggressive response of the police demonstrates that the ruling elite do not intend that it should. The aim is to bring the strike wave to a halt before it can grow any larger and before it brings in the millions of unemployed and underemployed workers, particularly young workers, in the townships.

The unions are seeking to impose an end to the engineering strike. The Steel and Engineering Industries Federation said that they had reached an "in principle" agreement with NUMSA on Friday. Leo Kok of Toyota's Prospecton plant confidently expected to reopen this week.

Karl Cloete, deputy secretary of NUMSA, denied that the strike had been called off but admitted that the union leadership was discussing a settlement with the union's nine regions.

This same tactic was used last year to end the public sector strike. The unions continued to deny that they had reached a deal, while they forced it through the regional structures. Finally the members were confronted with a deal that all their local leaders had agreed.

Statements from ministers and employers have stressed that the strikes will damage the prospects of unemployed workers. This is a crude attempt to divide one section of workers from another. Every pay packet supports many unemployed family members and sustains the informal

sector in which most South African workers try to earn a living.

The real division in South African society is not between one section of workers and another, but between the ruling elite and the working class. Executive pay has just increased by 23 percent in South Africa's largest companies. South African executives are now paid 300 times the pay of the lowest paid employees in their companies. The difference is doubtless even greater when all the executives' fringe benefits are taken into account. But South African companies are under no legal obligation to reveal the full compensation package of their executives.

The demand for a 10-13 percent pay rise looks modest in comparison to the rise in executive pay. Set against the background of rising prices the pay demands seem positively inadequate. Electricity prices have just increased by 31 percent. The price of municipal services such as water, refuse collection and sanitation have increased sharply. Bus fares have risen, increasing the cost of getting to work. Food prices have been forced up by flooding and by rising world prices for commodities such as maize.

Sim Tshabalala, the head of Standard Bank SA recently pointed out that 65 percent of South Africans live on less than R550 a month (\$79) and 12 percent on R150 a month (\$21), that half of under 30 year olds are unemployed, and that the richest 10 percent of society earn more than the other 90 percent combined.

"Few would deny," Tshabalala wrote in the South African-based *Business Day*, "that we are sitting on a powder keg which is ready to explode for there are plenty of struck matches around."



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