

Municipal Workers join South African strike wave

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Municipal workers organised in the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) and the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (Imatu) have joined South Africa's continuing strike wave. They are demanding an 18 percent pay rise to keep pace with soaring inflation and improve their living standards.

SAMWU has more than 200,000 members and Imatu has some 12,000 members. They maintain all municipal services and are responsible for garbage collection, the sewage system, water and electricity supplies.

Strikers in the Eshowe area are said to have smashed water meters and overturned rubbish bins. Protesters at uMhlathuze Municipality, in Richards Bay, set tyres alight in the street and stormed in the municipal building to present a list of grievances.

Some districts have already had their water supply cut off, and rubbish is gathering in the streets.

Councillors from the Kwasani municipality, in the Underberg area, have threatened to prosecute strikers for sabotage. They claim that the workers selectively shut off water valves to certain areas, including tourist districts.

Many municipalities are obtaining court orders against the strikers. Some claim that these are essential services and that workers do not have the right to strike. Others have attempted to quash the strike on the grounds of violence. They are even using apartheid-era laws.

In Pietermaritzburg, Brian Zuma, admitted that there had been no violent incidents in the area.

"Striking workers, however, have been served with a court interdict which says that essential service workers have to return to work."

The municipality of eThekweni has obtained a court edict to declare the strike illegal. Mbombela local

municipality in Mpumalanga has taken similar action.

Acting municipal manager in Mpumalanga Norah Mthembu warned that copies of the ruling had been distributed to police stations. Workers now faced arrest, she said, if they entered any council premises.

These court rulings are a clear attempt to prevent legitimate public protests. The fact that councils have resorted to them indicates the potential for the municipal workers' dispute to spread more widely.

Their dispute has the potential to widen the struggle and to involve the townships, drawing in the majority of non-unionised workers who make a living in the informal sector.

Last year, public sector workers clashed repeatedly with police. They faced assaults with water cannon, stun grenades and rubber bullets. The press vilified them as "murderers".

But as the WSWs warned last year, the unions are doing their utmost to contain the strike wave and prevent it from broadening and taking on a political character.

A regular WSWs reader attempted to find out more about the SAMWU dispute and what the union is doing on behalf of its members. Below are his comments:

"Since Monday 15 August 2011, I have attempted to contact SAMWU officials; via telephone and email in order to determine the location of the SAMWU picket lines. The telephone was not answered, despite numerous attempts. The emails were not responded to. The SAMWU web site has provided no information about the picket lines.

"From the media reports it appears that in KwaZulu Natal the picket lines were not successful due to 'cold weather'.

"I contacted the World Workers Media Production people in order to establish whether they were aware of

the location of the SAMWU picket lines. They reported that no picket lines were established; instead protests were to be held. They could not provide information beforehand as to the location of the protest action.

“The City of Cape Town has approached the courts to apply the 1993 Gatherings Act (apartheid law) provision issuing an interdict against any additional protests within Cape Town by SAMWU.

“SAMWU members have been vilified in the media, being portrayed as greedy thugs. This has caused SAMWU members to become isolated from the communities at large. The City of Cape Town has employed scab labour to undertake the functions of SAMWU members.

“On 17 August only 50 SAMWU members were reported to have been picketing outside the Civic Center in Cape Town. I could find no information prior to the selection of the picket location.

“On 18 August SAMWU spokesperson Tahir Sema said that the 18 percent wage demand was not a ‘ridiculous’ figure on which to begin negotiations. ‘This figure will eventually be negotiated downwards. Just come to the table and begin negotiations’.

“The difficulty in obtaining information about the picket lines in Cape Town speaks to the union’s inability to mount any basic defence of workers’ rights.

“SAMWU is a part of COSATU, and part of the tripartite alliance. SALGA (South African Local Government Association) is the employer. This is a crazy situation, where the union subjugates its members to behave in the interests of the alliance against the interests of SAMWU members.”



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