

President Zuma calls on trade unions, state forces to end South Africa's strike wave

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South African President Jacob Zuma of the African National Congress (ANC) is attempting, on behalf of the South African ruling class and global mining corporations, to bring an end to the mass strike movement. His main instruments for doing so are the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and its affiliate, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

In a speech on Wednesday, Zuma urged an immediate return to work by striking miners, all of whom are involved in unofficial wildcat action. In return, he held up what he called an “Action Package” of measures that would supposedly prevent the spread of strikes by improving confidence in the economy and removing obstacles to sustainable job creation and economic development.

The announcement followed talks between senior government, business, labour and community leaders that had produced a grandly named “Social Pact”.

Wednesday's talks were led by the cabinet ministers, the presidents of Business Unity South Africa and the Black Business Council, and leaders of COSATU and its smaller rivals FEDUSA and NACTU. Leaders of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) also attended.

Such is the revolving door produced by the policies of “black economic empowerment” that many of the COSATU and ANC representatives could just as easily have spoken on behalf of the business groups.

Boasting that the organisations had “emerged today with one voice, one message,” Zuma called for workers engaged in unofficial strikes to return to work “as soon as possible”.

His “action package” purported to address workers’ grievances was, in reality, a call for a “social partnership,” i.e., the subordination of the working

class to the dictates of the employers. A 12-month pay freeze for public- and private-sector CEOs was included to provide a pretence of “shared sacrifice” in return for wage restraint by workers.

Other than that, little was on offer but hot air. Steps “need to be taken” to “address the large income inequalities in South Africa,” Zuma said. Measures were also needed “to address the challenges faced by workers and companies affected by the global economic slowdown.” What these were is anyone’s guess.

The bottom line, as Zuma put it, was that “the industrial relations environment in the mining sector must be normalised as a matter of priority” and the “integrity of the system must be defended.”

He was referring to the state-sanctioned system of collective bargaining, through which the trade unions are able to police their members and ensure that the class struggle is contained within safe limits.

Workers’ constitutionally protected rights to protest and strike “must be exercised peacefully,” Zuma declared, in an implied threat. “We will not compromise on this.”

Lending his backing to the ongoing state clampdown against the miners, he declared that government, business and the unions were in full support of lawful action by the authorities “to stabilise communities and normalise daily life across all communities”.

The breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) was reportedly represented at the talks. With the NUM having lost any authority among strikers, the AMCU is being groomed as a replacement and a means of bringing under control the innumerable rank-and-file strike committees formed in the heat of disputes at the nation’s platinum, gold, diamond and coal mines.



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