

30,000 South African autoworkers strike over wages and benefits

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South African autoworkers are entering the fourth day of a nationwide strike. About 30,000 members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) walked off the job on Monday, crippling production at numerous plants around the country, including those in Pretoria, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and East London.

The job action comes on the heels of the one-year anniversary of the Marikana massacre, when police, acting with the support of the African National Congress (ANC) government and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), killed 34 protesting miners engaged in a wildcat strike. South Africa has been rocked by ongoing labor unrest among miners, farmworkers and other sections of workers over the course of the past 12 months.

The autoworkers are demanding a 14 percent wage increase, a housing subsidy of 750 South African rand (about \$73), a weekly transportation allowance of R125 and compensation for reduced hours and temporary layoff. Some news outlets also report that the union is demanding improved medical benefits and greater flexibility in shift scheduling.

The employers, which include Toyota, Ford, General Motors (GM), BMW, Daimler Benz, Volkswagen and Nissan, and some other truck and bus manufacturers, are offering a 6 to 8 percent wage increase, barely more than South Africa's predicted 5.9 percent inflation rate. Meanwhile, they are recording massive earnings. Toyota's worldwide profits in the second quarter of 2013 climbed to \$4.5 billion, while those of GM reaching \$1.4 billion, Ford \$1.2 billion and Nissan \$819 million. Daimler Benz raked in \$6 billion during the second quarter, a 300 percent increase from the same period last year, while VW saw its pre-tax profits rise to \$4.6 billion.

The auto industry accounts for 7 percent of South Africa's gross domestic product and is supported by the ANC government with a favorable tariff regime that helps protect producers.

According to *Reuters*, wages in the industry range from about \$850 a month to a peak of \$1,800 a month for the most highly skilled laborers. However, the NUMSA reports that over one-fifth of this income is eaten up by the high cost of transportation in the country, as Apartheid-era settlement patterns mean that workers generally live on city outskirts, far from their place of work. The industry's miserly wages also confine many autoworkers to living in shantytowns. With South Africa's official unemployment rate at 25 percent, and 40 percent unofficially, in many cases a single autoworker is supporting a large extended family.

Talks between the NUMSA and the carmakers last took place on Monday evening, and the union states that it is waiting to be presented with a "revised offer."

Although there are some reports that the companies are attempting to keep production going with scab labor, it appears that operations have largely halted at all factories affected by the strike. GM and Toyota report that about 80 percent of their workforce are participating in the job action.

The National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of South Africa has estimated daily losses due to the strike at R600-700 million (about \$58 to \$69 million) a day, with output dropping by 3,000 vehicles.

The current conflict between South Africa's autoworkers and carmakers comes in the midst of a rising tide of labor militancy involving key sections of the industrial working class. Currently, gold miners are demanding double-digit percentage wage increases

from producers, who refuse to meet their demands. From May to July of this year, miners in the country's chromium, platinum, and gold mines engaged in wildcat actions, and more than 10,000 textile workers struck in KwaZulu-Natal province. These events were preceded by widespread unrest among South Africa's farmworkers.

According to South African Minister of Labor Mildred Oliphant, over 17 million working hours were lost in 2012 due to wildcat strikes alone.

The growing anger of the South African working class has been met with state violence, sanctioned by the trade union bureaucracy. The Marikana massacre in August of last year, carried out with the active support of the National Union of Mineworkers, was just the bloodiest in an ongoing series of brutal attacks. In May, police fired rubber bullets at miners protesting outside a mine owned by Lanxess Chrome Mining Ltd outside of Rustenburg. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has actively collaborated with the ANC government in the perpetration of violence against striking workers, which has included beatings, arrests, murder and torture. Cyril Ramaphosa, currently deputy president of the ANC, the former head of the NUM and a key leader in COSATU, owns a 9 percent stake in the mining operation at whose behest the Marikana massacre was carried out. Ramaphosa has a personal worth of \$365 million.

Striking South African autoworkers should take as a warning the August 13 statement issued by the trade union bureaucrats of the NUMSA, which goes out of its way to refer to "our beloved federation COSATU" when discussing the aims of the strike. Should the strike move beyond the bounds of what the NUMSA has prescribed or should workers reject any deal that NUMSA reaches, the union leadership is fully prepared to collaborate with the state in suppressing the workers' struggle.



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