

South Africa: ANC and unions exploit popular anger over electronic toll collections

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In a show of unity on October 7, International Day for Decent Work, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) president S'dumo Dlamini and his rival, General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, made a populist call for the scrapping of electronic tolling (e-tolling) on Gauteng province highways.

E-tolling has been an emotive public issue since before its launch under the aegis of the South African National Roads Agency Limited (SANRAL) 10 months ago.

"[W]e say down with e-tolls," Dlamini declared, admitting that in this as in other matters the COSATU executive were merely taking their cue from the African National Congress (ANC) provincial leadership in Gauteng.

"The [Gauteng] ANC rejects e-tolls," he affirmed. "This evil system must not be implemented in this country."

The ANC's Gauteng leaders were in turn shocked into action after their majority in the provincial legislature declined from 64 percent to 53 percent at the last elections in May. Also informing its opposition to the national ANC leadership and the Department of Transport is the perception of Jacob Zuma as having been reduced to a lame duck president in his current, second term, which expires in 2019. By then, Zuma will have been replaced as ANC president, since his term in that office expires in 2017. Consequently, if he is still at the seat of government at the Union Buildings, he will be beholden to the sitting ANC president.

This has convinced factions such as those dominating the Gauteng ANC that, far from being among those to be pandered to, Zuma is a spent force. It is likely that such calculations were behind the utterances of ANC Gauteng chairman Paul Mashatile at the party's recent elective conference in Pretoria: "It's not that I don't

like SANRAL. But they must know their place. Government agencies don't run the country, but the ANC [does]. I don't like government agencies that take on politicians."

Mashatile, a former premier of Gauteng, was returned unopposed as ANC provincial chairman earlier this month. He served as arts and culture minister until Zuma reshuffled his cabinet after the May elections. This ejection followed Mashatile's support of Kgalema Motlanthe, the candidate Zuma defeated when he was returned for his second term as ANC president.

Bickering between the Mashatile and Zuma factions goes even further back. A key gripe among Mashatile supporters is that as ANC provincial chairman, he should never have been eased out of the premiership of Gauteng, as he was in 2009 in favour of a more reliable Zuma supporter, Nomvula Mokonyane.

Mokonyane notoriously said of residents of Bekkersdal in their presence, that "the ANC doesn't need their dirty votes," when party elders sent her to the town last October to defuse service delivery unrest ahead of elections.

David Makhura was elected deputy chairman unopposed at the ANC Gauteng elective conference. He assumed the premiership of the province in May, after provincial structures submitted to the national leadership a list of candidates for the post that pointedly left out Mokonyane.

Makhura announced in his inaugural State of the Province Address the formation of a panel to "assess" the decision to institute e-tolling. The remit of the panel is confined to the socio-economic and environmental impacts of the scheme. It thus leaves out of consideration the burning question of the rationality and lawfulness of the decision in favour of e-tolls.

The advisory panel is set to submit a final report to

the Gauteng Provincial Legislature before the end of November. Meanwhile, according to the Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance, only 38 percent of drivers are paying their tolls, with SANRAL complaining that the panel has undermined investor confidence in the roads agency.

The establishment of the panel heightened tensions between the Gauteng ANC and the party's national leadership. National Transport Minister Dipuo Peters maintained that the government would not scrap the "user pays" system as the funding mechanism for urban roads, whose allocations from the national treasury have steadily declined. Makhura insists that the panel's findings will be binding.

"Pressure is building for the issue to be put to a national referendum," *Business Day* editorialised.

In its efforts to limit its losses in the municipal elections due in 2016, the Gauteng ANC is relying on the services of COSATU. The trade union federation has added its voice to calls for a civil disobedience campaign. COSATU in Gauteng has mooted a march to the offices of SANRAL on October 18, where members of the public are invited to burn the e-toll bills mailed them.

The role of COSATU among workers is to foster illusions in the ANC, or at least the existence of a faction that supposedly will balk at privatising infrastructure and passing on the costs thereof to the working poor. But in their stated opposition to e-tolls, Makhura, Mashatile, Dlamini, Vavi, et al. have simply latched onto an issue that in the public mind sets them apart from the scandal-prone Zuma administration. So long as the question of e-tolls had not threatened the jobs of any ANC leaders, as it now threatens them in Gauteng, they all would have gladly followed the party line.

The *Sunday Times* wrote in March 2013, "If e-tolling goes ahead, Gauteng motorists will pay R71 billion (US\$6.46 billion) in toll fees over the next 24 years, with the collection costs estimated to be at least R18 billion. This means motorists will pay billions...that will not improve roads but only profit" the Electronic Toll Collection (ETC) joint venture, the operator subcontracted by SANRAL to operate Gauteng freeways.

ETC is 65 percent owned by Austrian and Swedish arms of Kapsch TrafficCom.

For years, journalists have sought without success to prove a link between the e-tolling of South African highways and the multibillion-dollar arms deal through which the country acquired military hardware it did not need. Investigators have noted that arms contractor Saab AB sold its traffic management unit, Combitech Systems AB, to Kapsch AG in January 2000. A few months later, Saab sold 26 Gripen fighter jets to South Africa, despite the air force having previously considered them too expensive and unsuited for its purposes.

In any event, a cabal with unique access to the country's highest elected offices used its influence to ram through unpopular megadeals for its members and proxies. The conspirators intend to make the working class pay the astronomical costs. People like David Makhura and Zwelinzima Vavi are as much complicit in this culture as anyone else.

A significant section of the ruling tripartite alliance is now persuaded of the useful role played by "leftist" figures like Vavi in keeping working class voters tied to the ANC. This explains the populist turn of Makhura and Mashatile, with Dlamini tagging along behind. Vavi sounded a warning at the International Day for Decent Work gathering about the 50 percent of youth who are unemployed. "What do you expect people will do?" he asked.



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