

Union federation stages national strike in South Africa

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On Wednesday, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) held a national strike against job cuts and chronic unemployment.

The value of the South African currency, the rand, and prices on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange dropped in response to the strike. Tens of thousands of workers participated in the walkout, bringing economic activity to a near standstill across the country.

In speeches before crowds of workers, leaders of COSATU and allied parties made demagogic statements of allegiance to the working class and denunciations of “capitalists who exploit workers for profit.”

In reality, the call for a national strike is an attempt on the part of the trade union apparatus and its political allies, such as the South African Communist Party (SACP), to bind workers to the African National Congress.

As South Africa’s largest trade union federation, COSATU is a coalition of 21 unions that comprise workers employed in nearly every economic sector across the country, including mining, education, health care, textile, government, transportation, hospitality, and manufacturing. There are a total of 1.6 million workers represented by the federation. Nationwide, nearly one-quarter of South African workers belong to a union.

The national walkout comes amid a four-day electricity blackout across many areas of the country, with workers employed by state-owned electric utility Eskom participating in the strike. Eskom supplies over 90 percent of South Africa’s electricity.

Eskom has faltered in recent years under crippling debt due to government cuts. In breaking up Eskom last week, President Cyril Ramaphosa called for “bold and decisive action” to save the troubled utility. As a

prelude to complete privatization of public infrastructure, the president declared, “To ensure the credibility of the turnaround plan and avoid a similar financial crisis in a few years’ time, Eskom will need to develop a new business model.”

In announcing the national strike to South African media, COSATU stated, “The preparations for the strike against job losses are in full swing and the workers stand ready to fight and defend their livelihoods. Currently, the real unemployment rate is 38 percent, with close to 10 million people struggling to get jobs and over 17 million on welfare.” COSATU cynically stated that it will fight the Ramaphosa government’s plan to privatize state-owned entities, such as electric utility Eskom.

The union federation also declared that it would call on the ruling ANC government for a “significant” redistribution of wealth, increased social spending, and better pay and benefits to workers employed in the public sector.

The SACP, a close political ally of COSATU, also participated in the national march in Johannesburg, with SACP General Secretary Solly Mapaila making a speech decrying the mining sector’s job cutting.

While making several demagogic denunciations of capitalism and the exploitation of workers, Mapaila told the crowd that the ANC’s aim of privatization would be “fiercely” resisted.

Coinciding with COSATU’s strike, today the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) is conducting a walkout against pay cuts, cuts in funding for public infrastructure, and intolerable working conditions that the entire public sector suffers.

In its announcement, NEHAWU stated it aimed to stop academic and learning activities at “all the technical and vocational education and training and

community education (TVET) and training colleges” across South Africa.

NEHAWU declared the strike would be of an indefinite duration, with NEHAWU general secretary Zola Saphetha telling journalists in Pretoria, “The strike will commence at workplaces on the 14th of February in the morning and run indefinitely until all our demands are met by the department of higher education and training.”

The claims by COSATU and NEHAWU that they are conducting a fight on behalf of the working class are completely cynical and fraudulent. Over a period of several years, the ANC, in alliance with the trade unions, has presided over the destruction of millions of jobs and the slashing of wages and living standards for the South African working class, as well as gutting social spending.

The social misery experienced by the South African working class is in stark contrast to the obscene wealth amassed by a tiny handful of elites.

In South Africa, with a population of 56 million and the second largest economy on the continent, the unemployment rate has persisted at 27 percent. Among youth, the prospects are exceedingly gloomy, with a jobless rate of over 50 percent.

According to UNICEF, 84 percent of children in South Africa have no health care coverage. The paltry budget for health care in the country is a criminally low 13 percent.

Additionally, according to the Department of Labour, workplace injuries and fatalities in the country are at an all time high, with the construction industry, representing some 12 percent of GDP, suffering an average of two fatalities a week.

The unions are exposed for working in collusion with companies to slash the living standards of their workers, as illustrated by the actions of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 2012 that culminated in the Marikana massacre.

NUM sought to stop the strike at Lonmin Mines at Marikana that was overwhelmingly approved by mineworkers. Acting on behalf of Lonmin to break the rebellion, NUM deployed armed thugs who assaulted and shot at striking miners.

Escalating matters further, the ANC government under then President Jacob Zuma deployed security forces to Lonmin to break the strike, which resulted in

the killings of over 40 miners. The current president, Ramaphosa, was a director at Lonmin at the time of the massacre, and he denounced the strikers in bloodthirsty terms, applauding the massacre.

To soothe the increasing animosity among the South African masses toward the ANC government, during his state of the nation address last week, Ramaphosa, a multi-millionaire and former union boss, cynically promised several initiatives to improve the economy, including the construction of new housing, increased funding for education, and the creation of a national health insurance system.

Contradicting his populist rhetoric, Ramaphosa revealed the true aim of the ANC government of completely privatizing state-owned industries. Clearly speaking to soothe financial markets, Ramaphosa declared that his government would seek “strategic equity partnerships” with the private sector to rescue ailing state-owned entities. In this, Ramaphosa is laying the groundwork for the complete giveaway of public utilities to private corporations.

The strike comes amid acute worker unrest and growing class struggle across Africa and internationally. Above all, the South African ruling elite fears an independent mobilization of the working class outside of its control.

The strikes in South Africa must be understood in the broader context of the growing international class struggle, as evidenced by the recent strikes by teachers in Zimbabwe, the nurse’s walkout in Kenya, the anti-government demonstrations in Sudan, to the “yellow vests” protests in France, teachers’ strikes across the United States, and the wildcat strike by auto parts and other workers in Matamoros, Mexico.



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