

South Africa: ANC government orders a partial return to work amid mounting economic crisis

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South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) government announced a partial return to work as of May 1, along with an easing of the national lockdown measures put in place on March 27 to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

President Cyril Ramaphosa, taking his lead from the Trump administration, cynically employed the plight of workers to justify reopening the country even as the virus continues to run rampant, saying, "Our people need to eat. They need to earn a living."

There would be a phased approach to the easing of lockdown measures with the country moving from a "Level 5" to a "Level 4" after five weeks of strict measures to halt the spread of the coronavirus. Although South Africa has 6,783 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of May 4—the highest number on the African continent—some 131 people have died, far fewer than in Algeria and Egypt. Of those who died, at least 23 people, or 18 percent, were below the age of 50, while 19 or 15 percent were between 40 and 49 years of age. The hardest hit region is the Western Cape, which has reported more than half of South Africa's confirmed cases.

On March 15, 10 days after the first case was confirmed, the government declared a national state of disaster, shortly afterwards banning travel, closing schools, shuttering businesses and restricting the sale of non-essential items, including alcohol and cigarettes. Since then, it has used the police and army to ruthlessly enforce the restrictions. There were multiple reports of police beating people and preventing others from filming police abuses.

At least 12 people had been killed by the security forces by April 12, while nurses were shot with rubber

bullets after they protested about working conditions amid the pandemic. Soldiers and military police with stun guns and rubber bullets attacked taxi drivers on wildcat strike in Port Elizabeth after they blocked roads and stopped informal taxis operating, demanding the government compensate them for loss of earnings due to the lockdown.

The lockdown has caused grave hardship for millions of South Africa's 60 million people. Film of people waiting in kilometres-long queues for charity food aid went viral. Riots broke out in some of the most deprived areas of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth, where millions have been confined in their homes in cramped townships, as hungry people built barricades of burning tyres, looted the stores and fought running battles with the police.

South Africa, even before the pandemic, was facing a recession, mounting debts, falling commodity prices on the world markets and electricity shortages. At the end of February, the government announced plans to slash public-sector wages by more than US\$10 billion over the next three years in a bid to avoid a junk credit rating, signalling open war on the working class.

Now, the shutdown has threatened to send already rampant unemployment soaring, with experts predicting that the unemployment rate could rise to 50 percent. The Treasury has predicted that 2.5 million jobs could be lost and wages could fall by as much as 30 percent. South Africa's economy could contract by as much as 16.1 percent this year. More than 7 million jobs could be lost from the unfolding crisis.

Under the new rules, mining, steel production and some clothing retail stores will be allowed to reopen with 50 percent of their workforce. But this is not

enough for the bosses who say that this will not make it worth their while to open. Car manufacturers want a full return to work.

Restaurants will be allowed to deliver food and families to leave home to exercise. At the same time, more troops will be deployed on the streets, with an overnight curfew and the sale of alcohol and cigarettes still banned.

Although the ANC government had planned that students would return to school on June 1 after a phased return to work by staff in May, it was forced to change its plan after serious opposition from teachers who will now also only be required to return to schools on June 1.

The delay is being forced on the government because of the terrible crisis facing students, about which it has said nothing. At least 1,000 schools have been vandalised and burned since the lockdown began, despite the heavy military and police presence, leaving many students without classrooms or any physical infrastructure. KwaZulu-Natal is the worst affected province with at least 225 schools vandalised. There is as yet no indication that funds will be forthcoming from either the provincial or national government to repair and rebuild the schools, resulting in a further slashing of the budget and weakening of the curriculum.

Most of the schools that have been attacked have been looted of ICT (information and communication technology) equipment and food for the school meals programme that provides the one nutritious meal to all learners in poorer primary and secondary schools. The hand of armed gangs seeking to force the government to hire private security firms to guard government property is suspected.

The ShopRite group was forced to shut down 17 of its 200 supermarkets for cleaning and disinfection following protests by workers after two of its employees died of COVID-19, with another 20 ShopRite checkers workers testing positive following the company's failure to provide protective equipment and adequate testing.

One worker told Independent Online (IOL) that it was not safe to work there, saying, "They have blood on their hands because they chose to put business above our lives and that of customers. They lied to the media and everyone else, claiming when they reopened all employees were screened. Most of us were screened,

while others carried on working without being screened. New staff members were brought in to replace those quarantined, but some were also not tested. So we don't know each other's status. We want justice and an investigation. They are continuing with lies, because after closing on Thursday they reopened today."

At least 100 illegal gold miners in Gauteng province were forced to stay underground in the sweltering heat when the lockdown began, as they feared what would happen to them as police and military personnel conducted ominous patrols above them. Johannesburg gold miner Zach said, "They are struggling to get to the surface (to buy food) as police are blocking the entrances and they fear arrest."

Often wrongfully blamed for fomenting violence and gang rivalries in the underground mines, the tens of thousands of illegal miners, many of them migrant workers from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho, have been forced in the face of high unemployment to live in slave-like conditions, now compounded by the pandemic.

At the same time, South Africa's 450,000 mineworkers in the corporate mines worry measures are not in place to protect them from infection. The government had exempted 129 mines from lockdown, allowing the companies to carry out care and maintenance of the pits, despite putting miners' lives at risk as they travel down the mine in cages squeezed together or work in teams at the pit face. The mining companies were allowed to resume production after promising to give workers "access" to masks, gloves and safety glasses, as well as infrared monitors to check workers' temperatures.



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