

South African health care workers strike as opposition to ANC government mounts

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Health care workers rallied in Pretoria and Capetown last week against poor working conditions and government corruption in the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE). They said that the lack of PPE was putting health care workers' lives at risk.

Their fears are justified. According to official figures from last month, more than 27,300 health workers have tested positive and 230 have died from the disease. South Africa has recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Africa at nearly 640,000 and nearly 15,000 deaths. Testing remains abysmally low with the result that the true scope of the pandemic's spread is unknown, allowing the virus to spread unchecked.

In Pretoria, health care workers demonstrated outside the office of African National Congress (ANC) President Cyril Ramaphosa at the Union Buildings. They carried placards that read, "Thank you frontline workers" and "Remove corrupt officials." It is part of a wave of protests and strikes by public service workers.

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU), one of the largest public sector unions in the country, is threatening that its 240,000 public workers will strike on September 10 unless the government meets demands including greater protection from COVID-19, danger payments for workers on the frontline and a pay increase that should have been awarded in April. A strike would cause a major disruption to the country's health care system under conditions where 2,000 new cases are being reported every day.

Workers at South Africa's National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) had planned to strike nationally on August 28 over low pay, failure to implement previous agreements and the lack of PPE, but were prohibited by a Labour Court order designating them as essential workers. Health care

workers at the NHLS are responsible for carrying out diagnostic tests for patients who use the public health sector, including those for COVID-19, HIV and tuberculosis.

According to the ruling, NEHAWU members would be breaking the law if they promoted or encouraged any strike action or other conduct in pursuit of their demands. The NHLS would then be able to call on the South African Police Service to force them back to work. The health care workers at the NHLS courageously went on strike, defying the court's decision.

Workers told South Africa's *Daily News* that the NHLS was not compliant with COVID-19 safety regulations, and that this exposed employees to the risk of contracting the virus. They said, "Safety measures are non-existent in certain facilities and we are left exposed to danger. We want the department to resolve this issue including the long outstanding salary increment. We don't get paid risk allowance and bonuses. The salary increases were due on April 1 as per resolution 1 of 2018."

NEHAWU called off the strike, despite spokesperson Khaya Xaba telling the media that the strike was the start of an "indefinite strike." Workers say they still plan to join the national walkout set for September 10.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has called for a general strike on October 7 in protest against corruption, the government's failure to protect workers in the COVID-19 crisis and its plans to cut \$10 billion from public sector wages over the next three years in the wake of pandemic. This year's budget deficit is expected to be 16 percent of GDP, even as South Africa secured a \$4.3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund.

The unions have been forced to call for a national

walkout in the wake of the continuing crisis over the government's response to the pandemic, increasing poverty, police brutality and the outcry over government corruption.

The pandemic is accelerating after the ANC government organised a return to work, calling off one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, and what was a relatively widescale regime of testing to stem the spread of the virus. The lockdown was enforced with extreme police brutality—on a per capita basis South Africa records more killings by the police than the US.

The government has now largely abandoned any efforts to stop the spread of the virus, moving the country to “Level 2” lockdown as it rushes to open the economy and embrace “herd immunity.”

Like all governments around the world, the South African government is forcing teachers and students back into classrooms to then drive parents back to work to produce profits for the transnational corporations and South African bourgeoisie, which will lead to the resurgence of the coronavirus. Schools reopened to children on July 6 after being closed for nearly four months, only to be ordered to close by Ramaphosa three weeks later—after the country saw a dramatic rise in cases to more than 10,000 a day. They reopened again for most grades on August 24.

The Department of Education has provided few if any resources for schools to reopen safely, only requiring that schools be kept at 50 percent capacity, with students alternating attendance, to allow for social distancing. This is set to further strain the already dreadful education system and will prove impossible to implement in provinces such as Gauteng, home to Pretoria and Johannesburg, where at least 1.5 million students are set to return to the classrooms.

The trade unions offered no resistance to the government's plans, only expressing concern that the rushed and premature reopening would provoke opposition and resistance among parents, students and teachers. Their fear was this justifiable anger would prove impossible for them to contain.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the country's social, economic and political situation. Ramaphosa became president in 2018, after four years as vice-president under President Jacob Zuma. This billionaire and former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) came to power citing corruption

as a barrier to international capital investment. He was welcomed by the global financial oligarchy and the South African ruling elite as providing a much-needed facelift to South African capitalism, which had taken a beating under the rampant corruption presided over by Zuma. The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing Ramaphosa and his administration as corrupt and venal.

The latest allegations of corruption and graft involve state contracts worth \$295 million for medical equipment, goods and services to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, and the inflated prices for PPP. The alleged beneficiaries include companies owned by the husband of Ramaphosa's now-suspended spokeswoman, Khusela Diko. Her husband had received a \$7.6 million contract to supply the health department of Gauteng province with medical equipment. Bandile Masuku, Gauteng's provincial health minister, was forced to resign following allegations he was linked to the irregular procurement of health supplies. The sons of the thuggish Secretary General of the ANC, Ace Magashule, were also awarded inflated contracts.

The exposures threatened to provoke an all-out factional fight within the ANC, with former President Zuma accusing Ramaphosa of threatening to destroy the ANC. Tony Yengeni, a senior party member close to Zuma's faction, called for Ramaphosa to step down accusing him of having received bribes to secure his post. The top leadership of the ANC's National Executive Committee summoned Ramaphosa to the integrity committee over allegations that he had received nearly \$25 million in campaign funds from business interests and industrialists during his campaign for the presidency.

Fearing an eruption in the working class, the ANC leadership closed ranks and came down on Ramaphosa's side, denouncing the allegations from the Zuma faction as “choreographed.” Prosecution charges have now been brought against several companies and the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) is investigating 658 contracts related to COVID-19 procurement.



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