

One-day nationwide strike against South African ANC government

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Three and a half million workers belonging to South Africa's four largest trade union federations held a one-day national strike on Wednesday.

Anger has been mounting over job losses, wage cuts and the rampant corruption of the African National Congress (ANC) government led by President Cyril Ramaphosa, the billionaire and former trade union leader. Ramaphosa, elected president in 2017 promising to end corruption, has overseen an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the top layers of society.

The strike affected sectors including schooling, transport, metal and steel companies and the automobile industry. There were motorcades, pickets and rallies across South Africa's nine provinces. On Tuesday night, workers occupied the Limpopo legislature in Polokwane—Limpopo province is the second poorest province in the country.

On Wednesday, many businesses in the Johannesburg city centre closed as workers marched from COSATU House, singing and chanting through the city.

The mass walkout is part of a broader wave of struggles by workers in recent months that have seen repeated actions by healthcare workers, municipal workers, bus drivers, teachers and workers in meat processing plants, steel works and warehouses.

On Monday, rail workers began an indefinite strike at Gautrain, the 80km-long rapid transit rail system linking Johannesburg's international airport with Pretoria. Mineworkers at three companies are to strike for pay increases to cope with rising food, rent and fuel prices and metalworkers are demanding an eight percent wage increase. Workers in the textile, power and transport sectors are also set to take strike action.

Wednesday's general strike was called by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)

with 1.8 million members, the Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) with 560,000 members, the South African Federation of Unions (Saftu) with 800,000 members, and the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) with 400,000 members, against the ANC government's repression of workers amid the raging coronavirus pandemic.

The ANC, since coming to power in 1994, has represented a corrupt layer of the black bourgeois and upper petty-bourgeois elite at the expense of the masses of workers and poor. The strike testifies to the explosive social and economic relations that characterise post-apartheid South Africa, the continent's most industrialised country.

The pandemic has exacerbated South Africa's already serious economic recession, particularly affecting mining—as demand and prices for the country's minerals fell—and manufacturing. More than two million workers lost their jobs between April, when the lockdown that shut down all but essential services and industries took effect, and June. Some 30 percent were already unemployed before the pandemic, with a massive 50 percent of young people between the ages of 15-24 without work. According to *Statistics South Africa*, the expanded rate of unemployment is now 42 percent, which includes those who have given up looking for jobs.

GDP fell by a massive 16.4 percent, equivalent to an annualised rate of 51 percent, the sharpest decline since the Great Depression. GDP per capita has been declining for years as growth failed to keep pace with the increasing population while inequality soared. South Africa has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. The top 20 percent of the population take more than 68 percent of income. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF),

income per capita in Gauteng—the main economic province that includes Johannesburg and Pretoria—is almost twice that in mostly rural provinces like Limpopo and Eastern Cape.

The lockdown forced five to six million people (15 percent of adults), mainly manual workers, to leave the townships and go back to their home villages, putting pressure on their families. Many households ran out of money for food, doubling the rate prevailing in 2017. The government's special grant, set up to help those without other forms of social security, had by early June paid just 600,000 of the 15 million eligible people.

The government's budget deficit for 2020-21 has been revised upwards from an expected 6.8 percent of GDP to 15.7 percent, with more than a fifth of the budget going on servicing debt.

South Africa, a country of 59 million people, has recorded 686,891 COVID-19 cases and 17,408 deaths making it the worst affected country on the African continent. Most of the casualties occurred after the ANC government organised a return to work in a bid to stem the fall in corporate profits, calling off one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, enforced with extreme police brutality. On a per capita basis South Africa records more killings by the police than the US.

The government has presided over the deliberate looting of taxpayers' money in a spate of corruption scandals, including in the state power utility Eskom and its suppliers that have led to severe outages, and among employers that fraudulently claimed Covid-19 relief funds without paying them out to their workers.

The latest politician to be caught in a corruption racket is ANC Secretary-General Ace Magashule, who is under investigation over millions of rands spent during his tenure as Free State Premier on the failed Estina dairy farm project that left farmers destitute.

Also at issue is the government's refusal to honour its pledge to raise civil servants' salaries in April, as promised in a 2018 three-year wage deal struck in 2018, claiming it is now unaffordable.

COSATU, the largest trade union federation and a government partner with the ANC alongside the South African Communist Party, has been adept at keeping its members in check. But along with the other three union federations, it was 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, worsening power cuts and the outcry over government corruption. Its hope is that the limited action, combined with a torrent of left-sounding rhetoric, will let off steam.

The federation's concern is its own position vis a vis the ANC government. Speaking outside COSATU House in Johannesburg on Wednesday, COSATU's Gauteng chairperson, Amos Monyela, indicated it would withdraw its electoral support for the ANC if it did not hold talks with the union. He said, "We are marching against the people we elected into power. We are saying we will indeed withhold our vote if we are not engaged in immediate discussions."

Irvin Jim, the general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) also objected to being sidelined, saying, "Employers did not waste the crisis imposed by Covid-19 and the lockdown, which they used to attack workers' wages by unilaterally imposing wage cuts of between 20-25 per cent without consulting with the union."

These scoundrels have done nothing to defend their members. They have functioned for decades as a prop for successive corrupt and utterly despised ANC governments as they isolated and sold out strikes they were unable to prevent from taking place.



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