

Massive strike by steelworkers in South Africa

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More than 150,000 steel and metal workers went on strike Tuesday in South Africa, demanding substantial wage increases from the employers and vowing to stay out until they achieve this goal. The strike is not a one-day or limited protest, but open-ended, to demand an immediate wage increase of 8 percent this year, and inflation plus 2 percent in each of the next two years.

The first day of the strike, called by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), had a celebratory character, with thousands of workers wearing red shirts thronging the streets of Johannesburg and other cities in powerful demonstrations.

Wednesday's events demonstrated the seriousness of the class confrontation that has begun. In Boksburg North, 50 kilometers east of Johannesburg, private security guards opened fire and shot and wounded one striking worker, who was taken to a local medical clinic. Police claimed to be investigating a case of attempted murder. No arrests had been made but the police confirmed the shooting and that the victim "was among the people wearing Numsa T-shirts."

In Booyens, just south of Johannesburg, a group of workers demonstrated outside a factory and police opened fire with rubber bullets, with at least one worker taken to the hospital for treatment of injuries. The police claimed they were reinforcing the security guards at the factory when the workers refused orders to disperse.

Another confrontation took place in Krugersdorp, 50 miles west of Johannesburg, but no shots were fired at the striking workers, according to news reports.

Strikers were active in five of South Africa's nine provinces, and marches and picket lines were staged everywhere. The strike is expected to swell to a total of 300,000 once other workers in the affected factories, including some unions allied to NUMSA, join in.

The workers are demanding a wage increase of 8 percent in the first year (the official inflation rate in consumer prices was 4.9 percent as of August 2021), followed by inflation plus 2 percent in the second and third years of any agreement. If the country's inflation rate remains at roughly 5 percent a year, this would come to 22 percent over three years.

The Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA) has countered with an offer of 4.4 percent for 2021, inflation plus 0.5 percent in 2022, and inflation plus 1 percent in 2023.

The strike is virtually 100 percent effective in steel mills and metalworking factories throughout the country. The executive director of the National Association of Automotive Component and Allied Manufacturers, Renai Moothilal, warned that the auto industry would be affected soon. "We urge parties to speedily resolve the impasse and prevent long-term damage and possible line stoppages to vehicles being assembled in SA and abroad," he told Reuters.

The auto industry directly employs 110,000 workers in South Africa and accounts for nearly 7 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The country's steel industry is the largest in Africa, and, together with metalworking, accounts for nearly 15 percent of the nation's GDP, some \$44 billion. The largest steelmaker is ArcelorMittal of South Africa, the local branch of the global giant.

The steel and metal workers strike is the first since 2014, when the workers struck for four weeks, with a significant impact on the South African economy.

The steel and metal workers will be reinforced Thursday by millions of workers taking part in a one-day strike called by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) to pressure the African National Congress (ANC) government over its

economic policies.

The one-day strike is an effort by COSATU to let off steam in what is clearly an escalating movement of the South African working class. The country was rocked by widespread rioting in July, triggered by the jailing of former president Jacob Zuma but driven by mounting anger in the working class over inflation, the coronavirus pandemic, and decades of broken promises by the bourgeois nationalist ANC regime.

COSATU General Secretary Bheki Ntshalintshali said the purpose of the strike was to demand “urgent action from policymakers in government and decision-makers in the private sector to stop the attacks that are directed at workers.” He added, “Both the public and the private sector have been blatantly undermining collective bargaining.”

The COSATU head complained that companies that had received financial incentives from the government as part of its response to the COVID pandemic were “either hoarding or exporting cash out of the country,” rather than investing it within South Africa.

COSATU is part of the government against which workers are striking Thursday, alongside the ANC and the South African Communist Party. A similar one-day protest in 2020 involved three million workers, but this year some other union federations have refused to join COSATU in the one-day strike.

The steel and metal workers’ strike testifies to the explosive social and economic relations that characterize post-apartheid South Africa, the continent’s most industrialized country.

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 regime has enforced the dictates of the multinational corporations, including through the violent suppression of the working class, as seen in the 2012 Marikana Massacre, when police murdered 34 striking platinum miners.

South Africa has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. The top 20 percent of the population takes more than 68 percent of income.



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