

# South Africa: COSATU holds one-day protest strike as steel strike continues

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The ongoing indefinite strike of 150,000 steel and metal workers in South Africa was joined yesterday by a one-day protest strike organised by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

Members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) are demanding an eight percent wage increase this year, and inflation plus two percent in the next two years. Inflation was running at 4.9 percent this August. The Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA) has offered 4.4 percent for 2021, inflation plus 0.5 percent in 2022 and inflation plus one percent in 2023.

Any prolonged action will have a major economic impact on the steel industry, accounting for roughly 15 percent of the country's GDP, and indirectly on the car industry, 7 percent of GDP.

It has been met with serious violence, including rubber bullet volleys and at least one shooting.

The one-day strike called by COSATU was "focused on pushing both government and the private sector to act to fix the economic mess that the country finds itself in and take seriously the issues that are affecting workers and South Africans in general," according to the union.

Specific demands included:

- The reversal of budget cuts which have led to public sector wage freezes, the side-lining of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), and cutbacks in state-owned companies.
- The dropping of austerity measures in the 2022 Medium Term Budget Policy Statement, due to be put forward this November.
- For the private sector to end an investment strike in the country, with funds hoarded or moved abroad.

COSATU offered "support and solidarity to the workers affiliated with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) in the metals and engineering sector who are fighting for an 8% wage increase."

Both organisations are reacting to the extreme social tensions building up in South Africa and seeking to head off an anti-capitalist movement in the working class.

COSATU, as a member of the country's governing Tripartite alliance, together with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), is directly implicated in the policies it formally opposes. The organisation's close relations with the ANC and SACP have seen its credibility in the eyes of workers shredded. Between 2013 and 2018, its membership fell by 600,000, from 2.2 million to 1.6 million. Over half its members are in the public sector.

NUMSA, led by Irvin Jim, is the driving force of rival organisation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), which advances itself as a left alternative to COSATU. Jim's organisation was thrown out of COSATU in 2014 after NUMSA withdrew its electoral support for the ANC and stopped paying dues to COSATU or the SACP in 2013. It helped found SAFTU in 2017 and is its largest affiliate.

Besides factional concerns, Jim was motivated by a fear that COSATU was becoming too exposed in the eyes of the South African working class, especially in the wake of the 2012 Marikana Massacre which saw the police murder of 34 striking platinum miners and injury of dozens more. The ANC, COSATU and the National Union of Mineworkers were all complicit in this crime.

In the current steelworkers' strike, Jim has denounced SEIFSA's offer as an "insult", accusing the employers of having "acted as typical greedy capitalists" and of wanting to plunge workers into a "slavery national minimum wage." He has called for a "total shutdown of the engineering sector until these stubborn employers see sense," promising, "We are not backing down. This is an indefinite strike until all demands are met."

For all Jim's rhetoric, the years since the split with COSATU have proved that NUMSA and SAFTU offer no

genuine alternative for South African workers. Overall trade union density in South Africa is just 23 percent.

After Jim set up a new party in 2019, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party (SRWP), it polled just 24,439 votes in the national elections of that year. SAFTU did not endorse the initiative, saying it would "resist being stampeded into becoming a labour desk for, or forming an alliance with, any political party." The SRWP's vote total represented just seven percent of the 339,000 members of its parent, NUMSA.

South Africa's social crisis has forced both NUMSA and COSATU into their recent actions, to control rising working-class protest, with this summer's riots coming as a sharp warning.

More than 330 people were killed and troops deployed to the streets of major cities during July's unrest, triggered by the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma for contempt of court but driven by economic despair and the aggravating effects of the pandemic.

According to the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity (PMBEJD) group, over half of South Africa's population, 30.5 million people, live below the 'upper' poverty line of 1,335 rand per person per month, roughly \$90. Close to a quarter, 13.8 million people, live below the food poverty line of 624 rand per person per month, \$42, set at the amount needed to afford the minimum required daily energy intake. Food prices increased by roughly 10 percent between September 2020 and August 2021.

Over a third of South Africa's workers, 34.4 percent, are unemployed, according to Statistics South Africa—the highest rate since quarterly labour surveys began in 2008. The figure rises to 44.4 percent if workers discouraged from actively seeking employment are counted.

The World Inequality Lab reports that the richest 10 percent of the population own more than 85 percent of household wealth, while more than half the population have negative wealth, with debts outstripping assets.

This March, the government lifted the minimum wage to a miserable 21.69 rand an hour, \$1.45. PMBEJD commented, "Set at such a low level, the national minimum wage works to institutionalise the low-baseline wage regime and lock millions of workers into poverty."

Jim nodded to this social reality in calling the steel strike, accusing the government of having "failed to take measures that ensure that employers cannot continue with the super exploitation of black and African labour and that there must be a national minimum wage which must be a living wage in the country." He added, "That is why

workers are alone. They must take the future in their own hands and embark on a strike to improve their wages and conditions."

NUMSA will not lead such a struggle. The union allowed the employers to use the pandemic as an excuse to freeze wages last year, deferring negotiations from 2020 to June 2021. Spokesperson Phakamile Hlubi-Majola said at the time that the union had to consider "the economic impact the lockdown has had on most companies in the sector."

NUMSA began the current strike by cutting its original demand for a 15 percent wage increase almost in half, to eight percent. Jim commented, "The union and its members has been flexible in its demands." There will doubtless be more "flexible" revisions to come.

For its part, COSATU's one-day strike was little more than an attempt to have workers blow off steam. Earlier this year, affiliated public sector unions accepted a well below inflation 1.5 percent pay rise, after the government reneged on a prior agreement to a 7 percent increase, citing pandemic pressures on finances.

Resolving the enormous crisis confronting the South African working class demands new, rank-and-file organisations of struggle guided by an internationalist, socialist political leadership, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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