

South African steel striker killed, union prepares to betray struggle

Patrick Martin
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With one striker killed by a motorist and dozens wounded by rubber bullets fired by security guards and police, the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) said it was discussing a settlement that could be put to the membership as early as Monday or Tuesday.

In a statement issued on Friday, the fourth day of the huge strike by 155,000 steel and metal workers, the union gave no details of the proposal it had received from the Steel and Engineering Industry Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA). “If our members are satisfied with it, we may be able to settle the strike,” NUMSA said. “In the meantime the strike will continue.”

Lucio Trentini, chief executive at SEIFSA, representing more than 1,000 employers, said that a “framework proposal” was agreed that covered wages, the length of the contract, and its application to workers and companies not directly covered by the deal. However, he refused to give any details, saying that he hoped for a response from the union by Monday or Tuesday.

NUMSA called the strike to back demands for wage increases of 8 percent this year, and 2 percent above the inflation rate for 2022 and 2023. SEIFSA had offered 4.4 percent this year, 0.5 percent above inflation in 2022, and 1 percent above inflation in 2023. Metalworkers received no increase at all in 2020 because the union agreed to a year-long pause in contract talks and industrial action due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Press accounts suggested that a deal was imminent, with the *Daily Maverick* reporting, “NUMSA is open to embracing a compromise, only if steel employers sweetened their offer by at least a percentage point or two.” This would mean a deal very close to the industry offer, since the gap between the public positions of the

two sides is 6.1 percent.

The union’s conduct of the strike is the clearest demonstration that it is doing the bidding of the employers and the African National Congress government, not the workers. After it was revealed that a striking worker had been killed on the first day of the strike, last Tuesday, the union merely declared it was “saddened” by the event.

The striker died after a motorist deliberately rammed his car into a group of workers assembled at a pickup point for a march to the picket line in Wadeville, southeast of Johannesburg. The names of the victim and of his assailant have not yet been made public.

“It seems the motorist was angry when they were picketing and took the law into his own hands,” said union spokeswoman Phakamile Hlubi Majola. But she gave no further details as to whether the assailant was connected with either the metalworking companies or a firm recruiting strikebreakers.

Hlubi Majola went on to complain of violence against strikers on the picket line. “Some of our members have been attacked by members of the SAPS [South Africa Police Service] and, in some cases, they have been attacked by private security companies.

“On Wednesday, workers were shot at with rubber bullets whilst picketing at Diesel Electric. According to the report issued by union officials on the ground, the worker was shot with rubber bullets in the eye at point blank range.”

Two other workers were seriously wounded at a company called KK Engineering when they were shot on the picket line.

NUMSA’s complaints about violence against strikers are perfunctory and largely for the record. The union leaders are far more concerned that strikers might take matters into their own hands and fight back. The union

called on strikers not to act unlawfully, saying it had received reports of allegations that NUMSA members were involved in attacks on those crossing the picket line, including at least one truck driver.

NUMSA held a special meeting of its National Executive Council to discuss the latest proposal from SEIFSA and indicated it would now present it to the membership. The union spokeswoman did not clarify whether the union would recommend acceptance of the deal.

Rank-and-file workers interviewed in the local media said they would accept nothing less than the 8 percent demand. Paul Legau, a forklift driver in Germiston, east of Johannesburg, spoke to the news service GroundUp. “I am currently rating R30 an hour [US\$2 an hour],” he said. “Employers are playing with us and they do not care about our needs. For the past three years I have been earning the same amount. What will my family eat?”

Another worker, Sifiso Sibiya, said: “Inflation is soaring high, even bread is expensive, yet our pay remains stagnant. Some of us are earning as little as R21 an hour [US\$1.40 an hour]; it’s an insult. The companies we are working in are upgrading their machinery. When will they upgrade our pay?”

In an effort to cover up the impending betrayal of the strikers, the leader of the umbrella group to which NUMSA belongs, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), made a demagogic threat of a general strike. Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of SAFTU, said his group would issue a 14-day notice to launch a two-day national strike against what he called “the attacks on the working class.”

NUMSA is trying desperately to wrap up the strike less than a week after calling it, on the employers’ terms, and SAFTU is providing a bit of “air cover” for this despicable betrayal. The 14-day notice would be rendered moot in the event of a NUMSA settlement, and the rest of the unions affiliated to SAFTU are in any case far smaller and weaker, so even if the two-day strike actually materialized it would have little effect.

Even Vavi’s “call to action” was hedged about with safeguards against anything actually happening, since he merely urged “all SAFTU unions and non-affiliated across the economy to file urgent secondary strike notices in support of the engineering strike led by NUMSA.” In other words, he issued an appeal to

individual unions to take action, while the federation he heads actually does nothing.

This is the type of militant-sounding hot air for which South African unions, particularly the more “militant” groups like SAFTU—a breakaway from the larger Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)—are notorious.

COSATU is actually a full partner in the government, which rests on three organizations—the African National Congress, COSATU itself and the South African Communist Party. COSATU was founded under the auspices of Cyril Ramaphosa, the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, who went on to become a billionaire mine boss and is now president of South Africa.

It was Ramaphosa who infamously defended the slaughter of miners at Marikana in 2012 in the midst of a strike by platinum miners who had defied the NUM and joined the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

Underlying the powerful strike by metalworkers, which threatens to trigger a shutdown of the auto industry as well, is the long-term crisis of South African capitalism. While the country is frequently described as the most industrialized on the African continent, this is no longer true, as one recent report documents. Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria all have more workers employed in manufacturing.

South Africa is one of 13 countries whose gross domestic product has actually dropped over the past decade, in its case by 3.3 percent. Employment in manufacturing is down 40 percent since 1990, and down 15 percent since 2019. Manufacturing output is down 15 percent since its peak in 2008.



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