

South African metalworkers strike expands

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Some 16,000 workers in a smaller union have joined the 155,000 members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), who walked out October 5 over demands for wage increases and other improvements.

Members of the Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (MEWUSA) announced that its members in the industry had come out on the picket lines. A third union, UASA, said it was in dispute with the employers but had not yet approved a walkout.

The strike has begun to have an impact on the South African auto industry, which is entirely dependent on steel and auto parts that come from the factories where NUMSA members have walked out. The German-based carmaker BMW was the first automaker to announce the disruption of production, saying that its main assembly plant was affected on Monday, losing 700 vehicles.

The executive director of the National Association of Automotive Component and Allied Manufacturers (NAACAM) said in a statement, “We expect more OEM [Original Equipment Manufacturer] assembly lines to be impacted if the strike continues into next week, due to lack of production in parts of the supply chain.”

The auto industry accounts for 5 percent of South Africa’s GDP, on top of the 8 percent of GDP represented by the output of the steel and metal industries themselves.

The strikers continue to encounter widespread violence from police and security guards. At least six workers were injured Monday when police fired rubber bullets at a picket line outside the Wireforce plant in Germiston. Edward Matube, the union secretary in Germiston, said police told the workers they were to keep at least 150 meters from the Wireforce premise.

Matube said one of the police began counting down from 10 for them to disperse. “We were leaving when

they started shooting, so they shot at our backs,” he told the press. Another union officer, Nelson Kiyane, released photos the next day showing bullet wounds on his thighs and on other workers’ backs and legs, confirming that they were shot as they were moving away from the factory, not toward it.

The expansion of the strike coincides with an official statement from NUMSA rejecting the latest contract offered by the major employers federation, as well as attacking two smaller employers groups which have failed to make any new offer at all.

NUMSA announced Wednesday it was rejecting the offer by the Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA), which raised the proposed first-year wage increase from 4.4 percent to 6 percent but still well below the 8 percent demanded by the union and limited only to the lowest paid workers. Metalworkers received no wage increase at all in 2020 because the union agreed to freeze all bargaining during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a press conference Thursday, NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim put on a demagogic show of intransigence, while at the same time holding out an olive branch to SEIFSA. He used as props for this cynical performance the refusal of two smaller employer groups, the National Employers’ Association of South Africa (NEASA) and the South African Engineers’ and Founders’ Association (SAEFA), to match the offer made by SEIFSA.

Jim said that SEIFSA had limited its offer to workers currently making the minimum pay at each company, while the union wanted any increase to apply to all workers at all pay grades. But NEASA and SAEFA, whose member companies tend to be smaller, less well financed and based in the regions rather than the central industrial area around Johannesburg, have refused to make a new offer to the union. The union leader called the 4.28 percent raise proposed by NEASA a “non-

offer.”

While SEIFSA had reached out to NUMSA after the beginning of the strike, the other two associations were sabotaging the structure of collective bargaining and seeking to “advance down variation of wages in industrial sectors.”

“Our message to SAEFA, NEASA and their CEOs is that they must stop their shenanigans of working to break down the collective bargaining power of workers and come to the negotiation table,” he concluded.

The effect of these statements was to present SEIFSA as the “good” employers’ group and the other two as “bad” federations, although SEIFSA includes the largest and wealthiest of the corporations, including those linked most closely to globally mobile capital. The result could well be a settlement with SEIFSA only that leaves workers at the two smaller groups in the lurch.

It is extremely significant that the NUMSA leader declared his support for a deal at the 6 percent level, provided that this was extended to all pay rates and not just the minimums, effectively abandoning the 8 percent demand for which the workers went on strike.

Irvin Jim said that for the past decade metalworkers had received “unilaterally imposed crumbs or no increase at all,” although his own organization is by far the largest in the industry and has done nothing to fight back, including the betrayal of the last major strike in 2014.

He went on to criticize the government of President Cyril Ramaphosa and the ruling African National Congress. “The working class across all sectors, particularly the industrial proletariat with hard skills, have been victims of an ANC government that failed to impose a meaningful national minimum wage that breaks the back of the apartheid wage gap,” Jim said.

This government, however, depends for its existence on the support from the trade unions. The biggest labor federation, COSATU, is actually part of the government, and Ramaphosa himself, before he became a billionaire capitalist boss, was the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers.

NUMSA broke away from COSATU, but it never broke with the fundamental political perspective of the ANC, the Stalinist South African Communist Party, and COSATU, which is the development of “black capitalism” in South Africa to replace the apartheid

monstrosity, rather than the mobilization of the vast power of the South African working class on the basis of revolutionary socialist politics.

In the current strike, the ANC government will inevitably play a reactionary anti-working-class role. Employment and Labour Minister Thulas Nxesi has limited his statements so far to calling for calm. “It is common cause that the country is now going through one of the most difficult periods occasioned by the pandemic on one hand and the inclement economic conditions that prevailed even before COVID-19 on the other,” he said.

“It is against this background that we appeal to all the players—workers and employers, unions, federations and employer bodies—to handle the sensitive talks with the necessary caution,” he said, adding, “Cool heads should prevail and the good of the country and our economy should always be at the top of mind.”

What terrifies the ANC government and the capitalist class which it serves is that the trade union organizations, which act to defend the ruling elite and suppress the working class, are increasingly discredited, and the working class is now coming forward into revolutionary action.



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