

South Africa union calls off metalworkers' strike

Patrick Martin
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The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa called off a strike by 155,000 steel and metal workers Thursday, just as the strike had entered its third week and was beginning to have a powerful impact on the auto industry and the country's economy as a whole.

NUMSA general secretary Irvin Jim appeared at a press conference armed with pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric to cover up what is in every respect a rotten betrayal of the courageous struggle waged by the workers, in which two strikers have been murdered and dozens beaten or wounded by police and security guards, using truncheons and rubber bullets.

Jim appeared with a backdrop of wallpaper decorated with the slogan "All Power to the Working Class" and proceeded to give his media audience a ten-minute lecture on the irreconcilable class differences under capitalism, and the necessity for "winning gains in the streets," not the boardroom. He compared the strike to the revolutionary movement that led to the fall of the apartheid regime in the early 1990s.

Then he got down to business, moving from inevitable class conflict to corporatism without breaking stride. He bemoaned the unwillingness of metal industry employers to make common cause with the union. SEIFSA (Steel and Engineering Industry Federation of South Africa), the main employers group, had "missed an opportunity," he said. "This was a chance for the organization to lead, and to break new ground in championing a new vision for the engineering sector, for the benefit of the economy, employers and workers."

Last week the union leader had flatly rejected the SEIFSA offer of a six percent increase because it was to be applied to the minimum pay for each grade level, rather than to what workers actually receive, which is usually higher. The strike began October 5 on

NUMSA's demand for an eight percent increase, together with wage rises of one percent plus inflation in 2022, and two percent plus inflation in 2023.

SEIFSA, however, refused to budge. Two smaller unions accepted the deal, and the federation declared it would begin paying the increase to individual members of NUMSA if they went back to work. On Wednesday night, the union's national executive committee met and agreed to accept the six percent deal, calculated based on minimums and not actuals.

The NUMSA general-secretary said, "We decided to accept the current 6 percent on minimum despite our clear demand that it must be given on actual rates. We have taken a conscious decision that as a union we will compromise and accept the current offer from SEIFSA."

There was a further climb down on pay in the second and third years, where the SEIFSA offer was six percent in 2022 and 2023, rather than a sliding scale based on inflation. In the likely event that inflation, currently running at five percent, accelerates, metalworkers will see their real wages actually cut.

Jim sought to disguise the union back down on wages with rhetorical nonsense and calculated diversions. In response to one reporter's question as to why the union had not accepted the six percent offer a week ago when it was first put on the table, Jim replied that the offer had to be taken back to the members, "because we are a worker-controlled union."

After admitting that consultations on the picket line with workers found the rank-and-file opposed to the six percent deal calculated on minimums, he then convened the national executive committee of the union, which decided to accept the deal. In other words, the members were consulted and then ignored, in this "worker-controlled union."

Jim then launched into a diatribe against three smaller employer federations, SAIFA, NEASA and CEO—representing smaller, more backward and regional businesses—because they had refused to match the six percent offered by SEIFSA, which includes the largest and most profitable companies. He called these lesser groups of capitalists conservative, racist, and “engaging in an accumulation strategy based on the super-exploitation of black and African labor,” seeking to blame an inherent feature of capitalism on race prejudice.

The union leader also appealed to the government of South Africa to enforce the deal on an industry-wide basis, by compelling the three smaller employer groups to match the pay being offered by SEIFSA. He was in daily consultation with the Minister of Labor, he said. Jim did not mention that South Africa’s president, Cyril Ramaphosa, a former union leader, is now a billionaire capitalist. He is one of those who, according to the rhetoric that began the press conference, are in irreconcilable conflict with South African metalworkers.

The NUMSA leader declared that all workers should go back to work starting Friday, October 22 and no later than Monday, October 25. It remains to be seen whether the 171,000 workers now on strike—155,000 members of NUMSA and 16,000 members of the smaller MEWASU union—will follow his instructions.

Nervousness about this prospect clearly underlay the fake militancy of much of Jim’s performance at the press conference. “A union should not sleep in bed with any employer,” he declared. The “21 rand an hour” offered by some employers “will not even pay for the food for their dogs,” he said.

But when asked point blank why he accepted six percent after previously rejecting it, and did not persist in the demand for an eight percent raise, he replied cynically, “negotiation is give and take.” Then he went on, revealing the concerns in the union apparatus over the militancy of the workers. “The strike if extended could become violent,” he said. “We are a responsible union. We live to fight another day.”

In a final self-exposure, he declared, “We are not cowards. We have the capacity to take a decision.” Translated from demagoguery into plain English: “We are not afraid to betray.”



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