

South African trade unions organise “stay away” as warning to ANC

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Thousands of workers took to the streets of Pretoria, Cape Town and other major cities across the country Wednesday. They were protesting the skyrocketing cost of living, power cuts and widespread unemployment that have made living conditions intolerable for workers and their families.

In Pretoria, workers marched on the Union Buildings where South Africa’s presidency is housed, holding placards saying, “Stop Taxing Basic Food Items.” They called on President Cyril Ramaphosa and his African National Congress (ANC) government to bring down the rising cost of living.

One woman told the BBC, “We’re tired. The cost of living is too high now—we can’t afford anything anymore. It’s school fees, it’s transport, it’s rent, it’s everything.”

She added, “We can’t live anymore, and we’ve been without a [pay] increase for four years now, and things are getting hectic now. The government must intervene and do something now.”

Inflation is at its highest rate since the rise in global food prices in 2008-09. Consumer prices rose by 7.8 percent in July, and basic foods have gone up by 10 percent in the last year, with a loaf of white bread now \$1.05 compared with \$0.91 a year ago and the price of fuel increasing by 56.2 percent from last year.

Last week, the South African rand fell a further 5 percent against the US dollar as the Federal Reserve discussed further interest rate hikes, a move that will exacerbate the economic crisis engulfing the already heavily indebted country.

South Africa is the most unequal society on the planet. A staggering 46 percent of workers have no jobs, 30.3 million of the country’s 59 million population live in poverty and 13.8 million face food scarcity.

It was under these conditions that the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu), two of the largest trade union federations, called a “mass stay away” of non-essential workers, demanding the ANC take action. The Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) and the

National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) along with several transport and taxi drivers’ unions, did not join the action, although several civil society and community organisations joined the marches.

The last time COSATU called a National Day of Action was in October 2020 in protest of the government’s response to the pandemic—including curfews implemented with horrific police brutality—that fueled unemployment and poverty while protecting the corporate and financial elite. According to official figures, a gross underestimate given the lack of testing, more than 102,000 people have lost their lives to COVID-19.

COSATU has for decades been in a Triple Alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Together, they worked to suppress workers’ struggles and prevent them taking a revolutionary path to ending apartheid, thereby ensuring the survival of South African capitalism and averting the eruption of political and social conflict in all the former African colonies of the imperialist powers.

Since the ANC’s accession to power after the 1993 elections, COSATU has done everything in its power to keep its members in check. But along with Saftu, it called for a national walkout to stem mounting anger over the government’s lack of response to the cost-of-living crisis. Their hope is that this limited action, combined with left-sounding rhetoric against Ramaphosa’s 3 percent pay award to himself and ministers, will defuse workers’ anger.

COSATU and Saftu are desperately seeking to restore the credibility of the trade unions, guaranteeing the political ties necessary for the capitalists to maintain their exploitation over the working class, and to warn the ANC it is sitting on a social volcano. Ramaphosa is now so widely reviled that the party long associated with the fight against the hated apartheid system could lose the elections in 2024.

In 2017, COSATU backed Ramaphosa as the successor to Jacob Zuma, who was forced to resign as ANC president amid mounting allegations of corruption. Ramaphosa, who once headed the country’s largest union, the National Union

of Mineworkers, before exploiting the structures of the ANC's Black Economic Empowerment to become a multimillionaire, used his position as a non-executive director of the mining conglomerate Lonmin to call for the government to take action against striking miners in 2012. The ANC responded, sending in security forces to close down the strike. In the resulting clashes, they shot and killed 34 miners and wounded 78 others.

Since then, the "Butcher of Marikana" has done everything he could to prop up South African capitalism, cutting corporate taxation as he drove down workers' pay, renege on public sector wage deals and slashing living standards. It has earned him the undying hatred of South African workers.

Striking gold miners at Sibanye-Stillwater booed Ramaphosa—COSATU's guest of honour—off the stage at the May Day rally in Rustenburg, the centre of the country's mining region. While COSATU spokesperson Sizwe Pamla apologized for such "regrettable" and "unacceptable" actions, he said it was an understandable expression of workers' frustration with the ANC government.

He warned the ANC, "Historically Worker's Day is a day where workers reflect on their struggles and push for change. This is a message that the ANC cannot claim to misunderstand and that cannot be ignored anymore. The Marxist revolutionary and political theorist Leon Trotsky once said: 'The party that leans upon the workers but serves the bourgeoisie, in the period of the greatest sharpening of the class struggle, cannot but sense the smells wafted from the waiting grave'."

Ramaphosa and the ANC government ignored the warning and continued with business as usual, using the security forces to intimidate workers and suppress protests.

In the last week, council workers on pay strike in Middelburg, Mpumalanga faced violence at the hands of security guards employed by the council. The council suspended 100 workers who walked out on August 15 demanding an increase to salary scale level 5. When workers entered the council premises to collect their letters of suspension, security guards opened fire, leaving one dead and hospitalising three more.

It follows the killing of at least four workers and the wounding of thousands by the police during protests over service delivery, high taxes and the exorbitant cost of electricity in Thembisa township, Johannesburg, after the authorities cancelled free electricity and water.

Last month, hundreds of ANC supporters marched through Johannesburg, South Africa's commercial capital and largest city, with a list of economic demands and calls for Ramaphosa, now mired in scandals, to go. In the most recent scandal, he is accused of covering up the alleged theft of \$4

million hidden in his Phala Wildlife farm, with the help of Namibian officials and his personal security guards, who are accused of kidnapping and torturing the thieves. The ANC rally followed calls by opposition parties for Ramaphosa to step down, with the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Julius Malema, calling for his impeachment over the affair. The EFF was set up by Malema, a former African National Congress Youth League leader, in 2013.

Former ANC President Thabo Mbeki issued a rare criticism of Ramaphosa, saying he had no plan to address the poverty, unemployment and inequality, and predicted civil unrest that might "spark our own version of the Arab Spring."

Despite the widespread unrest, COSATU and Saftu made little effort to build for the "mass stay away," issuing few substantive demands on the government. Saftu's General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi even told reporters the unions were not expecting large numbers of people to join marches, blaming this on the abysmal state of public transport. He said that it was more important that workers took part in the nationwide strike. In the event, the call received a limited response from workers.

The deep distrust of the unions demonstrated by the relatively low turnout expresses the need for new forms of working class organization. To give political and organizational expression to the developing global movement of the working class, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) fights for the construction of rank-and-file committees in workplaces, coordinated nationally and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the building of a South African section.



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