

Millions threatened with hunger as South Africa's ANC seeks to terminate Social Relief of Distress grant

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The African National Congress (ANC), allied with the Democratic Alliance (DA) and a cluster of right-wing parties in South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU) is planning to terminate the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) in March 2026. The decision to withdraw a lifeline on which millions depend is a declaration of war on the working class.

The grant currently keeps 8.4 million people from starvation. An estimated 45 percent of the country's population depends on social grants or the SRD grant as a primary source of income. This includes approximately 13.2 million child support grant beneficiaries and 4.3 million recipients of the old age grant.

The SRD was first introduced in May 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a concession extracted from a terrified ruling class facing the threat of social upheaval. Prior to the pandemic, unemployment exceeded 12 million and inequality had reached record levels. Working-class communities were living in squalor, without secure access to electricity or running water, plagued by rampant crime, corruption, poverty, particularly among the predominantly young population.

When the ANC government imposed one of the world's harshest lockdowns, enforced with troops and rubber bullets, millions were deprived of all means of survival. Within weeks, nearly half of all households had run out of money for food, while soldiers patrolled the townships.

The WSWs consistently defended lockdowns as necessary public health measures to eliminate the virus. However, such measures had to be combined with mass testing, contact tracing, isolation facilities, and full income protection for workers.

Faced with the spectre of social upheaval, the ANC moved to grant workers a pittance of R350 (\$20) a month in May 2020. The grant was conceived as a temporary measure, confirmed when the government abruptly discontinued the grant in April 2021, only to hastily reintroduce it in August after the eruption of mass riots in KwaZulu-Natal and

Gauteng following the jailing of former President Jacob Zuma.

The ANC recognised that the unrest, that left at least 354 people dead with more than 5,000 arrested, went beyond the imprisonment of its former corrupt leader and president. The deeper causes lay in mass unemployment, staggering inequality, and deepening poverty, conditions intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Now, nearly five years later, the same state that spends billions of dollars to service its debts claims that it cannot afford to maintain this meagre lifeline for millions due to "fiscal responsibility". South Africa's national debt has ballooned to over R5.2 trillion (US\$290 billion) and is projected to exceed R6 trillion (\$330 billion) by 2026. In the 2025/26 budget, just R35.2 billion (\$1.95 billion) is allocated to sustain the SRD grant, less than one-twelfth of the amount devoted to debt service which stands at an astronomical R426.3 billion (\$23.7 billion). For every rand spent to keep a human being alive, twelve are paid to the financial oligarchy and international creditors in interest.

Behind this policy stands the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Last year the IMF declared that South Africa "needed to pursue ambitious fiscal consolidation to restore the sustainability of its public finances" and demanded "durable expenditure-based consolidation of at least 3 percent of GDP over the next three years." The IMF's country report, along with a World Bank review published the same year, made clear that any continuation or expansion of the SRD grant should be "financed through expenditure reprioritization," that is, by slashing other social programmes.

The ANC obeyed. It has frozen the SRD's nominal value, refused to link it to inflation, and maintained an income threshold that deliberately excludes millions. As the Food Poverty Line rises to R796 (US \$44), the means test remains fixed at R624 (US \$35), ensuring that the poorest of the poor are declared "too rich" to qualify. It is now moving to

terminate the SRD completely.

The consequences will be catastrophic. For millions of unemployed adults, the SRD grant is the sole source of income. Its real value has already fallen by nearly 20 percent since 2020 as the cost of food, electricity, and transport has surged. Termination will deepen misery on an immense scale. In rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal, where unemployment and underdevelopment are most severe, SRD circulates as the only cash income in entire communities.

The ANC talk of “replacing” the SRD with a grant “linked to employment” is a fraud. There are no jobs to seek in a country where the official unemployment rate exceeds 33 percent and youth unemployment has reached 62 percent.

The assault on the SRD grant exposes the reactionary character of the ANC-led GNU. Celebrated by the capitalist media as a triumph of “national unity” and “democratic maturity,” it has developed as the WSWS warned: the ANC’s “deal with the Democratic Alliance means intensifying a programme of class war at home in the interest of South African and international capital, under conditions where South Africa, the world’s most unequal society, is a social and political powder keg”.

Once hailed as the liberation movement that overthrew apartheid, the ANC has spent the past three decades functioning as the principal party of capitalist rule in South Africa. Upon taking power, it adopted the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme in 1996, a policy framework that embraced free-market principles, fiscal restraint, and privatisations. GEAR marked a decisive break from the ANC’s earlier promises of redistribution and laid the foundation for the deepening austerity of today.

As it continued imposing attacks on the working class and overseeing record levels of inequality, the ANC’s electoral support collapsed. From winning 62.7 percent of the vote in the historic 1994 election, it fell to 57.5 percent in 2019 and plunged to just 40.2 percent in 2024, its first loss of a parliamentary majority since the end of apartheid.

The ANC-DA alliance is a coming together of factions of the ruling class to enforce austerity and police state attacks on the working class. The DA descends from apartheid-era formations, including the National Party that ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994. The Government of National Unity were soon joined by other right-wing forces, including the Zulu ethno-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the anti-immigrant Patriotic Alliance (PA), and the white-Afrikaner Freedom Front Plus (FF+). This coalition marks the fusion of the black bourgeois layer cultivated through the ANC’s Black Economic Empowerment policies with the white capitalist elite in a united offensive against the

working class.

The ANC’s splinters that act as the nominal opposition, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Party, are refusing to mount any serious opposition to the SRD termination. They have not called for any protests, let alone strikes. Drawn from the strata that orbit the ANC, their calls for expropriation of capital owned by white South Africans seeks only a larger share of the spoils, not the abolition of capitalism. Both parties are exploiting legitimate anger against capitalist inequality to divert it into nationalist and chauvinist channels, including xenophobic campaigns.

As for the trade unions, they have issued statements opposing the SRD’s termination but have refused to call for strikes to stop it. This, despite COSATU, historically aligned with the ANC, still claiming around 1.5 million members; SAFTU around 650,000; and FEDUSA and NACTU around 600,000 and 400,000 respectively. While they have all denounced the government’s attack, with COSATU calling the failure to inflation-adjust the SRD an “absolute abomination,” SAFTU warning of “catastrophic consequences,” and FEDUSA declaring “hands off the poor”, none have initiated nationwide strike action. Their responses are parliamentary submissions, token marches, and appeals to the ANC.

The rejection of capitalist debt and the defence of the most basic rights such as access to food, jobs, housing, healthcare and education requires a decisive break from the trade unions and parties that function as instruments of bourgeois rule.

The fight for decent living conditions must become a political struggle against the capitalist system. The starting point is the construction of a revolutionary movement of the working class, independent of all capitalist parties and their allies. This struggle cannot remain confined to South Africa. It must be united with the growing movements of workers and rural masses across the continent, in Mozambique, Kenya, Madagascar, Angola, Morocco and beyond, as part of an international fight against global capitalism.



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