

South African Parliamentary Workers Defy Injunction and Continues Strike

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Labor unrest and Washington's threats involving participation in AGOA poses challenges for ANC government

Members of the National Education and Health Care Workers Union (NEHAWU), an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), are defying an interdict (injunction) to end their strike and demonstrations at the Parliament building in Cape Town which has prevented the normal operations of legislative sessions.

Negotiations were halted on November 16 when the NEHAWU leadership reported that their member's salaries were withheld due to their participation in the strike. The South African government is saying that the strike is illegal because the workers perform what is described as "essential services."

One of the main issues in the dispute is centered on the way performance bonuses are calculated. Labor leaders say that talks to end the strike will not resume until the workers are paid their salaries from November 6 when the work stoppage began.

Parliament workers perform various functions including cleaning and catering to overseeing the efficient operations of the legislative committee meetings as well as access control at the visitors' center. Consequently the strike has severely hampered the capacity of the parliament to function properly.

Sthembiso Tembe, the Parliament branch chairperson of NEHAWU, said "the strike is continuing." A settlement earlier in the year involving a 9 percent pay increase did not encompass the issues related to performance bonuses. (News24)

Since November 9, workers have engaged in strike actions inside the parliament building resulting in the cancellation of legislative committee meetings. The strike action has been strengthened by numerous messages of solidarity and support including from COSATU.

Other statements of solidarity have been sent from the NEHAWU regional leadership, the South African Students Congress's (SASCO) national executive committee and the chairperson the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) in the province. A rally held on November 16 emphasized that the NEHAWU demands were non-negotiable.

Independent Online reported on the rally noting that "Workers gathered in the Old Assembly chamber on Monday (November 16) morning on day seven of their strike to hear messages of support from the NEHAWU leadership, ANC alliance partners, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)."

The newly-elected NEHAWU Ikapa South regional secretary Baxolise Mali told the crowd “We are going to have a national shutdown...we are very clear. We are not fighting the alliance, we are fighting the employer.”

Mali conveyed to the parliamentary staff that the time for negotiating with Parliament was over. “We are not negotiating. We have passed that stage,” he declared.

The latest action is the result of not only the outstanding labor issues going back to 2014 over pay levels but also the demand for the removal of parliamentary secretary Gengezi Mgidlana.

On November 11 police used stun grenades in clashes with the NEHAWU members marking the second time in a month where the Parliament building in Cape Town has been the scene of battles between students in October and now workers. Law-enforcement officers wearing full body armor carried away members of NEHAWU. “The police must go,” union members chanted as they held their ground on the front steps of parliament’s second house, the National Council of Provinces.

Parliamentary administrators are saying that the adoption of the demands of NEHAWU would be unsustainable. South Africa is already facing serious economic challenges including the rapid decline in the value of its currency.

An article published in News24 says “The financial implications of agreeing to the National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union (NEHAWU) demands are unbudgeted for and unaffordable for Parliament given the shoestring budget it is managing, a parliamentary spokesperson said on Sunday (November 15). In a statement, a spokesperson said Parliament ‘is committed to continuing discussions’ with the union to ‘resolve the impasse which has seen the union embark on an illegal strike last week’”. (November 16)

Finance Minister Says Drought Will Compound Economic Crisis

At the G20 Summit held in Turkey, South African Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene spoke on the drought in the sub-continent which could impact agricultural production and consequently prompt a rise in prices for food and other consumer goods. The Southern Hemisphere is moving into the summer season and the lack of rain would destroy crops compounding the already precipitous decline in economic growth.

Nene told Reuters press agency in an interview delivered outside the conference meeting that the drought, “If it’s long, indeed it will have serious impact on food prices. It will have an impact on economic growth because agriculture is one of our focus areas. It would also have an impact on employment; it would have an impact on our revenues. We are bracing ourselves for the worst.” (November 15)

Problems with the state-owned Eskom utility agency have mounted over the last several months. Periodic power shortages and outages have compelled the government to take measures aimed at addressing the fall in consumer revenues from power generation.

The government response to the Eskom crisis includes the conversion of subordinated debt into equity, which Nene says has eased funding pressure. The utility agency has still not tapped into the roughly 50 billion rand (approximately \$US3.5 billion) of financial banking guaranteed by the government.

Nene said of Eskom “They still have room to play. All of that gives them breathing space between now and the time they go out to the market again.”

Obama Threatens to Suspend Aspects of South African Participation in AGOA

As it relates to South African foreign policy and the deepening economic crisis inside the country, the administration of President Barack Obama is demanding changes in Pretoria’s trade policy which the White House says maintains barriers to United States access to domestic markets.

The Africa Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) was established during the latter period of the presidency of Bill Clinton. It is ostensibly designed to foster the export of capital to the continent while providing market access for products produced by both the U.S. and African nation-states.

If the U.S. removes key agricultural sectors from the agreements with South Africa it could cause further damage to the economy. Negotiations to resolve outstanding issues are ongoing while a January 1 deadline approaches.

In a statement issued by the South African Communist Party (SACP) on November 9, supporting the ANC government’s position in the negotiations, the party says that despite its commendable declarations “in reality, AGOA is imperialist both in terms of its content and strategic goal disguised under the fetishist illusion of ‘free market’. Its extraterritorial imperialist content is now being aggressively pushed by the U.S. against South Africa.”

This same statement from the SACP goes on to emphasize that “to allow the U.S. to prohibit ownership of economic assets by the state in our country is to allow it to usurp our constitutional right to democratic national sovereignty. This will be tantamount to handing over to U.S. imperialism our right to determine our own development trajectory and decide policies to achieve it. The SACP is strongly opposed to, and rejects, imperialist domination in its entirety and all its manifestations.”

The party also noted “South Africa’s independence must be safeguarded in the interest of the completion of our struggle for national liberation and social emancipation. Our democratic national independence and public property rights – the right to collective ownership of productive assets including through the state – are crucial to the success of our second, more radical phase of transformation!”

Such a stance by the Obama administration illustrates the real agenda behind AGOA and the overall foreign policy imperatives of the White House. South Africa has the inalienable right to determine its own economic program without the interference of Washington and Wall Street.

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