

The End of South Africa's Historical Metalworkers Strike

Wage deal accepted by leadership in stoppage that began on July 2

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Global Research, July 28, 2014

Pan-African News Wire

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

A strike by 220,000 members of the National Union of Metalworkers in South Africa (NUMSA), the largest labor organization in the country, has ended with an agreement for a wage increase. The strike shut down production at General Motors facilities and other industrial locations.

Irvin Jim, the secretary general of NUMSA, said that the workers had agreed to a 10 percent pay hike for the lowest paid employees. Jim said that his members voted overwhelmingly to accept the deal.

"We urge all our members to report for work as from tomorrow (Tues., July 29)," Jim told the international press in Johannesburg on July 28. The strike had impacted 12,000 firms throughout South Africa.

The metal workers industrial actions halted production at large companies including construction and engineering group Murray & Roberts Holdings Ltd., beverage-can maker Nampak Ltd. and Toyota Motor Corp.

The Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of Southern Africa (SEIFSA) agreed to pay the lowest earners an annual wage increase of 10 percent for three years to end the strike, the deal was accepted by NUMSA as well as smaller labor unions such as Solidarity.

Nonetheless, another industrial owners' group the National Employers' Association of South Africa (NEASA) said it would not go along with the wage deal NUMSA announced. "We are not happy with the deal that has been done and will lock out the striking workers from Tuesday (July 29)," NEASA spokeswoman Sya van der Walt-Potgieter told reporters. (moneyweb.co.za, July 28)

The strike reportedly cost the owners of the affected firms 300 million rand per day (\$30 million). South Africa, which has been hit by a series of strikes in the major industries of the country for two years, is no longer considered by western-based financial publications as the leading economy on the continent. Nigeria, an oil-producing state in West Africa, is now regarded as the top economy in the region.

Compromise Reached to End Strike

During the final days of negotiations a compromise was reached between the employer's groups SEIFSA and NUMSA. The union will be allowed to strike over issues which were

unresolved in the talks.

The bosses credited the South African Minister of Labor Mildred Oliphant for her intervention as a major factor in ending the strike. The African National Congress (ANC) government has been quite concerned with the economic and social impact of extended labor unrest inside the country.

SEIFSA Chief Executive Officer Kaizer Nyatsumba acknowledged that a deal had been reached over section 37, where the employers' group was satisfied this would shield firms from two-tier bargaining. He welcomed the end of the strike and praised Oliphant for her role in facilitating negotiations which were stalled for several weeks.

"It is no exaggeration to say that, had she and her team not been involved in the process, the strike may well be continuing," Nyatsumba said in a statement issued by SEIFSA. "It is now incumbent on all stakeholders in the metals and engineering sector to work co-operatively together to grow the sector and to ensure that it is internationally competitive."

NUMSA Strike Tests Political Strength

This strike by NUMSA was also designed to test the political will of its members as well as public support for such an industrial action. The labor organization has been involved in an intense ideological struggle within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), where it is the largest affiliate, over its role in the Tripartite Alliance with the ruling ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

NUMSA has accused the ANC and the SACP of advancing policing which do not serve the class interests of South African workers. At the same time, other COSATU affiliates and officials have charged NUMSA leader Irvin Jim with being an ultra-leftist who is no longer functioning democratically within Alliance structures.

In addition, NUMSA has threatened to form a workers' party that could challenge the ANC in upcoming provincial and national elections. NUMSA refused to endorse the ANC for re-election in the recently-held national poll on May 7.

Despite the lack of support from the NUMSA leadership, the ANC still won over 62 percent of the vote and remains the dominant political party within the parliament and administration. Two other opposition parties, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) made gains in the proportion of representatives they have within the national parliament.

The EFF was formed by Julius Malema, the former president of the ANC Youth League. Malema, along with other former ANCYL leaders were expelled by the party's leadership during 2012-2013.

Malema has advanced demands for the nationalization of land and mines by the South African state. The DA advocates neo-liberal policies to the right of the existing program of the ANC.

The ANC says that it has not abandoned the Freedom Charter demands for land nationalization and people's control over the economy, but its critics say otherwise. Debates

around the future of the South African democratic transition will continue among the various parties and sectors of the working class.

Ultimately it will be the people based upon the political balance of forces, the level of organization of the working class and their consciousness which determines the futures of the struggle. Whether NUMSA is successful in building an alternative to the ANC will depend upon these variables as well as the popular will of the South African masses.

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