

WORKERS ON A GENERAL STRIKE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Hundreds of thousands of workers across South Africa are set to down tools on Wednesday, February 24th as a part of the general strike called by the left-wing South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). With 21 affiliated unions, SAFTU represents a total of 800,000 workers in the country. Most participants in this labour action will not report to work on the day. Demonstrations will be held in major cities.

The largest of these demonstrations is expected to be in the country's capital city, Cape Town. Workers here will march to the parliament where finance minister Tito Mboweni will be delivering his budget speech on that day.

The day was chosen to highlight the fact that the severe economic crisis faced by the working class is a direct result of economic policies of the government. The trade union has pointed out that only by forcing a radical reversal in policy can the workers salvage their future.

As a part of this shift, SAFTU has raised the demand for nationalization of all strategic monopoly industries, banks and mining houses to be placed under democratic worker's and community control and management, and the reorganization of "all economic life based on a democratically-planned economy".

"Capitalism fails the working class and the poor by design" "Capitalism fails the working class and the poor, not by default, but by design. It flourishes when there is a reserve army of unemployed labour, when there is discord and disunity among the working class and the poor, and the state takes the capital's side to increase exploitation and undermine civil liberties." Read SAFTU's statement on the strike.

Taking undue advantage of the pandemic, the employers in private and state-owned industries have resorted to mass retrenchments, many of which were planned months before the new COVID-19 strain was even discovered.

About 2.2 million jobs were lost during the pandemic and the total number of people categorized as "economically inactive" has exceeded 5 million. Existing jobs are becoming increasingly precarious because of outsourcing and zero-hours contracts.

"As workers struggle against these attacks, their chief defensive weapon, the trade unions, are under attack from bosses, using laws passed recently by the ANC government which make it almost impossible for workers to exercise their constitutional right to strike and to picket," SAFTU's statement added, demanding a repeal of the "pro-capitalist amendments to strike balloting and picketing rules."

A moratorium on all job losses, a "Basic Income Grant of Rs 1,500" and a living minimum wage of at least Rs 12,500 (USD \$ 854), are among the immediate demands to arrest the further deepening of the livelihood crisis and to provide a minimal cushion for the masses who have already lost their livelihoods.

SAFTU has demanded that the wages, bonuses and other benefits of the bosses must be cut and a wealth tax of 50% must be re-imposed, as a part of measures to raise the finances needed for the economic revival. The narrative that we are all in this together, which the elite tried to popularize during the pandemic, is bogus, insisted SAFTU's general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, at a press briefing last week.

Rather than bringing the cross-section of South Africans together, he said, the "pandemic divided us further in what is already the world's most unequal country. Rich capitalists have gotten richer while the working class is now much poorer. It is time to fight back. We must take the battle for our jobs, livelihoods and democratic rights to the streets."

TOWARDS A 'GREEN NEW DEAL' CONTROLLED AND LED BY WORKERS

While demanding for the urgent development of 'Green New Deal' to rapidly reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and methane gas, SAFTU has emphasized the need for a "just transition with mass job creation...protecting the interests of workers in the energy, mining, smelting, automotive and related industries, in CO₂/ methane-intensive agriculture, in tourism, and in working-class communities that had become dependent upon the high-carbon economy."

The renewable energy sector, it added, “should not be privatized but placed under the ownership, control and management of the working class and communities, while preserving and creating jobs”. The government, on the other hand, has been using the climate crisis as an opportunity to shed jobs in state-owned industries and privatize the energy producers like Eskom.

“Two thousand jobs have been cut from Eskom, and if (the) government its way, and closes down power stations, then we can expect at least 120,000 jobs to be lost from that process. This is because there are many companies along the value chain which depend on the existence of (these) power stations,” said Irvin Jim, the general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), which is the country’s single largest union with a membership of around 4000,000.

The Renewable Energy Independent Power Producers (REIPPs), to which the energy sector is allegedly being transferred, “are completely controlled and the technology is owned by foreign capital. The addition of REIPPs to the grid makes electricity more costly and this will only worsen over time. The working class already cannot afford electricity and by privatizing it, it will mean that even more people will be denied access. The working class demands and deserves to own and participate in this sector,” added Irvin Jim’s statement, extending support to SAFTU’s call for general strike.

REACHING OUT TO NON-UNIONIZED WORKERS

A number of other demands raised by SAFTU, such as community healthcare and public housing, a prohibition on evictions from farms, rented houses or ghettos built on occupied land etc., Transcend the sectoral concerns of the workers organized under unions. They address the concerns of the casual workers and the ‘self-employed’ ailing in the unorganized sector of the economy.

“The demands of the strike express the general demands of the working class,” read the statement by General Industries Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA), extending support to the strike.

“GIWUSA echoes SAFTU’s call in extending an unambiguous invitation to join this general strike to working class communities who are also reeling from the economic crises imposed upon them. Our enemy is one and requires working class unity in action at every given opportunity.”

Reassuring workers, especially those who are not unionized, that the employers cannot penalized workers for participating in this labour action, Vavi stressed in the press-conference last week that its affiliated unions have submitted a notice under Section 77 to the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) on February, providing 14-days advance intimation of the strike.

“This means that no employer may victimize or penalize any worker who chose to participate in the strike whether those workers are members of a different union or not a member of any union. Every worker who chooses to participate in the strike has a legal protection,” he explained.

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