



# South Africa: 155,000 NUMSA steelworkers on indefinite strike

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A mass strike has halted steel production in South Africa since 5 October. Due to just in time production techniques, which minimise stock levels and rely on a constant flow of inputs, the strike has already brought some BMW assembly lines and prevented the completion of 700 cars. More damage to the country's important auto industry (worth 5% of GDP) will undoubtedly follow.

Violence has marred the dispute from the first day, when an irate motorist deliberately ploughed his car into a group of strikers on their way to a picket line near Johannesburg, killing one of them and injuring a dozen others. But it is the police who have been responsible for most injuries, firing rubber bullets at the workers even as they are walking away from the action.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa is demanding an 8% pay rise this year and inflation plus 2% in the next two. This follows an agreement to forego any increase in 2020, due to the pandemic conditions. Inflation is rising and currently the rate is 4.9%, while the South African Reserve Bank is raising its interest rate by three-quarters of a point to 4.25%. So, the employers' initial offer of 4.4% was in fact another real pay cut.

Despite their strategic importance to the economy and the arduous nature of their jobs, workers in the steel and related industries can be on as little as £1 an hour. This stark fact forced the employers' federation, SEIFSA, which represents 1,000 companies, to up their offer to 6% this year and inflation plus 0.5% in 2022 and 2023 ? but only for the lowest-paid grades. NUMSA workers rejected this divide and rule tactic, though worryingly general secretary Irvin Jim has indicated that he would settle for 6% if applied to every worker.

### Compromise or escalation?

The all-out indefinite strike is poised at a decisive moment. Talks with the SEIFSA are ongoing, but the smaller bosses' federations have refused to budge from their original positions. Jim is clearly prepared to close on 6%, which even if it were extended to all grades would represent little more than a rotten compromise.

On the other hand, there is no sign of the strikers' resolve weakening. Mass rallies and militant picket lines of red-shirted strikers continue to brave police bullets and intimidation.

The workers know that productivity increases mean the bosses can afford to pay more. As one striker put it, 'The companies we are working in are upgrading their machinery. When will they upgrade our pay?? Most metalworkers are their families' main breadwinners, with one in three workers and over half the youth unemployed, they cannot afford to compromise.

Indeed, far from running out of steam, the strike is growing, as 16,000 members of the Metal and Electrical Workers Union (MEWUSA) joined picket lines in the second week. At the same time Zwelinzima Vavi, leader of the South African Federation of Trade Unions, SAFTU, issued a 14-day notice of a two-day general strike in solidarity with the engineers and steelworkers. SAFTU members should not wait the fortnight to start solidarity action but stage walkouts or bring their own claims forward to generalise the strikes.

It is also clear that COSATU, the main union federation and coalition member with the ANC in government, is not immune to pressure from below to stage strike action. On the day NUMSA started its strike, COSATU hurriedly called a two-day national stoppage, which was particularly effective in the wage-freeze hit public sector.

Townships activist Trevor Ngwane commented, "Giving workers short notice for stay-aways and strikes reflects poorly on COSATU's leadership. The rank and file must force their leaders to link up with SAFTU and NUMSA and maximise pressure on the ANC and the bosses."

The South African working class has proved itself over the course of a decade of struggle to be one of the most militant in the world, its vanguard steeled in a number of epic struggles. However, it remains politically weak; COSATU is still tied to the popular front government of the neoliberal ANC; the Economic Freedom Fighters remain aloof from trade union struggles, unless called by themselves; and Vavi and Jim's Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party was effectively stillborn.

What unites all these political trends is Stalinism, whose programme is limited to completing the "democratic stage", signalling a willingness to compromise with capital and blunting the anti-capitalist edge of all struggles. Sectarian division helps maintain these false leaders at the top of their organisations but wastes the power of the working class as a whole. A first step towards breaking this logjam would be to expand the NUMSA strike into an all-out attack on the capitalist system, which has failed to deliver freedom 27 years after the fall of apartheid.

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