

World Cup: workers strike over low pay

Keith Spencer Tue, 15/06/2010 - 15:14

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Despite poverty, repression and intimidation South African workers are striking over World Cup rip-off pay, writes Keith Spencer

A wave of strikes has hit the World Cup after workers say they have been cheated out of their wage. The government has responded by using police and repression to stop any sign of discontent on the world's TV screens.

Stewards at the matches say they have been paid less and less everyday they turned up at work since 27 May. The Stallion Security consortium, which hires the stewards, currently pays 190 Rand for a 10-hour day (about £17), which is a cut from what was promised. Originally workers were receiving 500 rand a shift or more.

In Durban, staff walked out over pay on Sunday. Associated Press reports that the Durban police used tear gas and rubber bullets after Sunday's match between Germany and Australia to disperse a crowd of stewards at the stadium. Eventually striking stewards were paid 205 Rand to go home.

Staff also walked out in Cape Town at the Green Point Stadium in the lead up to Monday's Italy and Paraguay match and are still out.

In Johannesburg, up to 2,000 stewards at the Ellis Park stadium joined the growing dispute and walked out over low pay before the Brazil and North Korea match on Tuesday.

The stewards and their union have demanded that FIFA brokers a deal but chief executive Danny Jordaan said the problem was an employer-employee wage dispute.

Elsewhere in the country, the major trade union federation Cosatu is also in dispute with the government over demanding a living wage for 1.3 million public sector employees.

Despite its reluctance to get involved in the strike at the World Cup stadiums, FIFA has demanded of the South African government concession after concession to maximise its profits while offloading the cost onto the South African masses.

For example, the city of Durban built the Moses Mabhida Stadium for the tournament, a state-of-the-art sporting venue with pitch, swimming pool, restaurant, executive boxes, etc. It was named after a Communist Party member who was part of the resistance to Apartheid and buried with full state honours in 2006. The irony is that none of the people Mabhida fought to liberate are allowed anywhere near the stadium for the duration of the World Cup - the Durban Council has driven out the poor to make way for tourists and TV stations.

FIFA's rules

FIFA won three main concessions from the South African government. First, new stadiums had to be built in affluent areas, not poor ones. One FIFA spokesperson said: "A billion television viewers don't want to see shacks and poverty." FIFA even demanded that a new stadium was built with Table Mountain in the background rather than refurbish an existing one. In order to build these new stadiums, local councils have gone to the courts to rob local communities of land and services. For example, the only two local schools in Nelspruit were demolished to make way for a stadium - over 1000 school students protested against the demolition. COSATU, the major trade union federation, has exposed that money is being diverted from much needed community projects.

Second, FIFA decreed that only official sponsors can sell goods near the stadiums, in order to make the 2010 World Cup the most commercially successful one yet. While Adidas, Sony, Visa, Emirates, Coca-Cola and Hyundai-Kia Motors all paid \$125m each to sponsor the tournament, the police have driven out market stallholders from these exclusion zones unless they buy a concession stand at a price of up to £5,000 - well beyond their means.

The police have also targeted migrant workers, arresting and deporting them, which gives the lie to the South African World Cup slogan of it being a "Celebration of Africa".

Third, the government has banned demonstrations and strikes for the duration of the World Cup, including anything that may criticise FIFA and the tournament. South African Marxist Patrick Bond described the measures being taken in Durban, including "sweeps by fighter jets, joint border patrols with neighbouring countries, police escorts for cruise ships and teams of security guards with "diplomat" training". The aim is to "prevent domestic extremism, strike action and service delivery protests".

The ANC rules for the bosses

The ANC came to power in 1994 to sweep away Apartheid and improve the lives of non-white people. Yet after 16 years of rule:

" Unemployment is upwards of 40 per cent.

" The top 10 per cent have more than half of the wealth.

" 30 per cent of homes have no electricity.

" The government's own figures have 48 per cent of households living below the poverty line - not much of an improvement on the 53 per cent in 1995.

The ANC is in power with the bosses. It carries out neoliberal policies and, as exposed during the World Cup, is prepared to boost the profits of the few at the expense of the many.

The danger is that the cost of the games will contribute towards South Africa's national debt of \$80bn - the cost of the 2006 Olympics was one of the contributing factors to the Greek crisis - and that workers and the poor will be made to pay. Already there are local activist organisations and social forums fighting privatisation and campaigning for better services. There have also been huge strikes among transport workers, miners and public sector staff over pay, jobs and working conditions. There are also campaigns against the World Cup corporate rip-off.

But the main trade unions in COSATU are still tied to the ANC despite the government ruling for the bosses. The workers and poor need their own party to fight beyond the democratic demand of the ANC's "one person, one vote" slogan and for socialism.

Billions across the globe will enjoy the World Cup. But the wealth from the tournament should be spent on improving the lives of the millions not bolstering the coffers of FIFA and its sponsors.

? More on the corporate nature of the World Cup in South Africa at www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/ ^[1]

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