

South Africa: Massive metal workers' strike

As the Socialist goes to press, the two-week strike by workers belonging to the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (Numsa) has been settled, with the union claiming to have won above inflation pay rises and concessions over the use of temporary workers though labour brokers. Mametlwe Sebei of the Democratic Socialist Movement (CWI South Africa) gave an earlier account on the significance of this struggle for workers in the private sector and its political significance for the trade union movement.

Workers in South Africa's metal and engineering industries embarked on strike action on 4 July, following the deadlock between the unions and employers in the Metal, Engineering and Related Industries Bargaining Council (Meibc). About 20,000 workers marked the beginning of the strike by marching through the streets of Johannesburg to the head office of the employers' association offices, with thousands of others protesting in Cape Town and Durban.

The strike is undoubtedly the biggest in the private sector in the past few years. It reflects the deepening restlessness of the South African working class and their determination to fight back against the savage attacks of the bosses on their working conditions and living standards.

The main demands of the workers are for a 13% wage increase (having initially submitted 20%), and the banning of the 'labour brokers', who employ over 23% of the workforce in the metal industries.

The employers are offering a 7% wage increase, which is up from the 5% they tendered at the beginning of the wage negotiations, and they are

unwilling to concede to the demand to end the usage of labour brokers in the industry.

Owing to the sheer size of the strike and the militancy of the metal workers, which is reflected in the radical rhetoric of union leaders, the strike has inspired other workers to join the fight back and further polarised society along class lines. This has forced leaders of major unions in related industries to start mobilising their members for strikes on similar demands.

On 11 July, around 70,000 workers in the petrol refineries joined the 200,000 participating in the metal industries strike. The National Mineworkers Union is also mobilising for similar actions in the mining industries. The union federation, the Con-

gress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), threatened to issue a call for a general strike in support of the metal industry workers and the living wage campaign.

Media campaign

The bosses are waging a savage campaign to try to discredit the strike. The media is calling for workers to halt industrial action in the "national interests" of "economic recovery and competitiveness in the global markets".

After these pathetic 'patriotic' appeals failed to stop the strikes or wider working class sympathy for the metal workers, the ruling class resorted to an outright media campaign of lies, distortions and exaggerations calculated to undermine the basis of workers' support and public sympathy for the strike. However, the strike still continues to enjoy support of many workers.

There are many fighting communities, social movements and other grass roots organisations of the working class which have openly stated their willingness to join forces with organised labour in support of workplace struggles but they are being marginalised by the Cosatu bureaucracy.

On the eve of the metal workers' strike, during the Gauteng activists' forum (part of the Democratic Left Front), these organisations called again on organised labour to take action (despite the Democratic Left Front's leadership's middle class politics, it galvanises a significant section of working class communities and social movements under its banner).

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and Cosatu leaderships failed to mobilise this support, which could re-ignite the finest traditions of the working class struggle against the apartheid regime in the 1980s; which saw communities stand in solid support of workers, and vice versa, during the long struggle against the bosses and the repressive state machinery.

This reflects the union leaders' ideological demoralisation and lack of necessary political perspectives

for a socialist solution to the capitalist crisis.

This is evident from their continued commitment to class collaboration. Union leaders formed 'the manufacturing circle', an alliance with bosses from big metal companies, for the purpose of finding 'solutions' to the crisis in manufacturing industries.

To the extent that the strike is successful, it will be a reflection of the militant traditions and high level of political consciousness amongst metal workers.

Rolling action needed

The Democratic Socialist Movement, (DSM - Committee for a Workers' International in South Africa) has support in the Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (Mewusa), which is party to the metal industry council. Here, DSM supporters called for the formation of strike and industrial site committees, together with solidarity committees.

The DSM argued that these bodies could mobilise all metal workers, non-metal workers and communities behind the call for mass rolling actions, culminating in a general strike of all workers and communities to crush the stubborn resistance of the metal bosses.

The failure of the union leaders to mobilise is reflected in the incidences of violence on the part of those workers, who feel isolated and betrayed by those breaking the strike.

These strikes again confirm the need for the organised working class to break with policies of class collaborationism and to build genuine fighting unions to take on bosses in the workplaces and to resist the repressive actions of the state.

The rank and file needs to campaign for democratic control of their unions and for the formation of a mass party of the working class. Such a party can unite all the fighting contingents of the working class - in communities, workplaces and social movements - and struggle with independent class policies for a government of workers and poor people.

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The Committee for a Workers' International

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