

South Africa: Thousands on strike against poverty-level minimum wage



**SAFTU
statement on
National
Strike
Today!**



SAFTU-led march – an historic victory for the workers

Wednesday 25 April 2018 will be recorded in the history of the South African trade union movement as an historic turning point, when workers took to the streets in their many thousands to demonstrate against a poverty minimum wage and amendments to labour laws which threaten the basic constitutional right to strike.

The South African Federation of Trade Unions congratulates and thanks all the members of its affiliated unions, civil society groups, political parties and members of the public who flooded the streets of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, PE, Bloemfontein and Polokwane, plus thousands more in rural areas and small towns who joined the protest by not working on the day.

The marchers delivered a thunderous warning shot to the government, employers and sweetheart union leaders that the people of South Africa are angrily opposed to the proposed national minimum wage of R20 an hour minimum wage, which entrenches poverty, legitimizes the apartheid wage gap and will keep thousands of workers in a daily struggle to survive, to feed the family and to pay for their children's education. It will make the world's most unequal society even more unequal and leave millions of the poor effectively excluded from the economy with all their meagre income being used just to survive.

There is no less anger at the proposed bills to amend labour laws, which will make it even more difficult for workers to exercise their constitutional right to strike.

Existing laws already require secret ballots to be held before workers can get a certificate for a protected strike, which most unions already use but as decided democratically by the members, not imposed by government.

Under the new amendments unions will have to navigate even more procedural obstacles, including extra laws on how secret ballots must be conducted, an even longer period for conciliation and picketing rules to be drawn up before a strike can begin.

A new clause will allow employers to sit tight, make no

attempt to negotiate and then go back to the CCMA and argue that the strike has been going on for 'too long' or is causing 'too much damage' and demand arbitration of the dispute, which will become compulsory unless unions object within a short period during which they have to consult their members. If they miss the deadline the arbitration can become compulsory, which would be an unconstitutional way to force workers back to work.

These bills will cause a particular problem for small unions with limited resources, and even more for groups of workers not in any union, who make up 76% of all employees but who have exactly the same constitutional right to strike. They cannot possibly comply with all these rules.

The effect of these bills will be to strengthen the power already dominant employers, and the teams of lawyers they hire to represent them. It will enable them emasculate trade unions, deny workers their basic human rights, allow their bosses to continue to exploit increasingly vulnerable workers and shift the balance of power even further in their favour.

if passed, these bills will severely worsen the already desperate plight of millions of workers, who face more job losses, casualisation of labour, a rising cost of living after increases in VAT, fuel levy and road accident fund levy, and deplorable levels of service in education, healthcare, and all other essential services.

The bills have been referred back to the Department of Labour for redrafting to include the submissions made to the parliamentary Portfolio committee on labour, one of which was made by SAFTU on 17 April 2018.

The federation will study the new drafts and demand that they are referred back for further discussion by Nedlac, but a Nedlac with SAFTU admitted, so that we can expose and oppose the scandalous deal on the bills which leaders of COSATU, FEDUSA and NACTU negotiated behind workers' backs and then signed off with government and business.

The bills will then return to Parliament and SAFTU will continue to persuade MPs to support its demands. Already we have convinced three parties to support our views – the Economic Freedom Fighters, the United Democratic Movement and the African People's Convention. We hope to convince more, including some ANC MPs.

We are also taking legal on a possible court challenge to parts of the bills.

But our campaign will never depend on MPs or courts to succeed, but on more of what we saw today – mass action on the streets, which will get bigger each time, until we finally achieve our goals which are for a living minimum wage of R12 500 and amendments to labour laws to make it easier, not harder, for workers to be able to enjoy their constitutional right to strike.

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