

Maturing contradictions: the 2010 public sector strike in South Africa

by Claire Ceruti

The huge strike in August by South African public sector workers brought the number of strike days in 2010 to the highest ever. Teachers and hospital staff struck for three weeks despite police harassment of picket lines and a series of court interdicts to prevent police, soldiers and nurses from striking¹. The strike started after members forced their leaders to reject government's 'final offer' of 7% and R700 (€70) housing allowance. After seeing the government's lavish expenditure on the 2010 soccer world cup, strikers found it difficult to believe that government could not meet their demands. The public servants were asking for an 8.5% wage increase and R1000 (€100) a month housing subsidy. However, the strike was much more than a wage strike: three years ago, public sector workers struck during the dying days of the regime of previous president, Thabo Mbeki, while the 2010 strike was a major test of his successor, Jacob Zuma and thus of the unions' strategy for social change.

The political implications of the strike were reflected in a striker's placard: 'Comrades are like buttocks. When they part 7% (shit) comes out.' This is a direct reference to the alliance between the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the biggest trade union federation, Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), whose affiliates comprise a majority in the public sector. Cosatu's strategy for change since the end of apartheid has been to influence government policy through this alliance. The strategy foundered under Mbeki, who was the architect of a home-grown neo-liberal program for South Africa before he was president. Under Mbeki, corporate tax was cut, more than a million jobs were lost and homelessness grew quicker than provision of low-cost government housing, leaving 15% of the country's population living in self-built iron shacks today.

The revolt against Mbeki was a long time maturing. It finally exploded on several fronts. From 2005, some of the poorest townships in South Africa took to the streets before municipal elections. The service delivery protests demanded not only the 'better life' promised in ANC election campaigns but also more accountable government. There was also a revival of wage strikes. These developed in tandem with a revolt inside the ANC and crisis in Cosatu's strategy. Union leaders were increasingly embarrassed that Mbeki used the alliance

to assert his authority over the unions, while dismissing their policy suggestions. Rather than concluding that Cosatu should become more independent, its leaders looked for friendlier faces within the alliance. A variety of forces, including Cosatu's general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, sided with Zuma after Mbeki expelled him from the cabinet. Zuma did not take the strikers' side in 2007, but argued for both parties to return to negotiations. However, the December 2007 conference of the ANC (now simply known as 'Polokwane' after its location), which voted for Zuma as ANC president, also promised better conditions for public sector workers.

The 2010 strike unfolded against the post-Polokwane reconstitution of the alliance, and exposed some of the contradictions between members' interests and the broad strategy of the union leaders. The 2007 strike was initiated by union leaders kicking against their marginalization in the alliance, and enthusiastically supported by the members. The 2010 strike, by contrast, was forced on reluctant leaders by the righteous expectations of the members.

On the one hand, union negotiators were confident that their new comrades in government, beholden to the unions for helping them to power, would make a satisfactory offer. On the other, government negotiators hoped their comrades in the unions would sell a deal to the members. They were under pressure to rein in wage demands both because of the fiscal hangover from the world cup and also to reassert authority amidst the new confidence of various alliance members to critique 'their' government publically. However, members were expecting nothing less from Zuma than to meet their demands. Any early misconceptions that government negotiators were acting against Zuma's real intentions and against ANC policy were quickly dashed when Zuma appeared on national television, just days into the strike, asserting the government's right to dismiss 'essential workers' who continued to strike.

Government came down hard on the strikers. Police used rubber bullets and water cannon on pickets at several hospitals on the second day of the strike, and fired on teachers who walked onto a highway near Soweto.

The mainstream media conducted a vitriolic campaign, blaming strikers for deaths of babies and disrupting education. Months before, six babies had died in a hospital under 'normal' conditions because of a shortage of basic disinfectants. Two months earlier, schooling was suspended for the world cup, while in Nelspruit learners are still without a school after their high school was converted into stadium offices. Without a strike support committee bringing affected communities into direct contact with the strikers, this moralistic pressure proved key in isolating strikers as the strike dragged on.

However political considerations were also important to understand why the strike was concluded as it was on September 6 with an agreement that most strikers feel was imposed from above. Cosatu was about to announce its proposals for economic policy, ahead of the ANC's national general council and therefore could not afford an all out defeat of the strike but neither could they afford to reach a breaking point with Zuma's camp if they wanted their policies to get a hearing. On August 27 a government spokesperson, Themba Maseko, was quoted in the *Business Day* newspaper saying: 'We are beginning to see and hear too many statements that are taking the strike beyond labour relations. It worries us'.

Vavi therefore played a very contradictory role throughout the strike. His role followed the logic of collective bargaining with a political edge: a negotiator influenced by strategic considerations related to the alliance. At a march in Johannesburg 12 days into the strike, on 26 August, Vavi echoed strikers' anger, declaring that 'the alliance is once again dysfunctional'. He also lambasted 'predatory elites' in the ANC and – crucial to the strikers' confidence – announced that the federation had filed notice for a one day general strike in solidarity with the public workers. However behind the scenes, he was working hard first to avert a strike and then to settle the strike. Vavi describes this role in a remarkably unselfconscious letter after the strike, responding to the teachers' union's accusations that they had been sold out. The letter encapsulates the contortions of a union leader caught between his comrades in government and the fledgling force pushing up below. Vavi writes that the negotiators were 'acutely aware how difficult it was for government to move' and describes a number of attempts to reach a compromise on figures suggested by the public sector union officials, but apparently not caucused with their members.

Shortly after the 26 August march, Zuma ordered the parties back to negotiations. Many strikers took this as a signal that they were winning. The announcement of the new offer – 7.5 percent – was a major blow to their morale. Most were also

furiously that Vavi announced this deal on national radio before it was put to the members, urging strikers to accept it because it was 'impossible' to win anything more. Vavi's reading is that government negotiators felt betrayed by their union comrades who had twice promised they could sell a deal to members, only to be told the members had rejected it.

Despite Vavi's recommendation, most hospitals and most regions of the Cosatu teachers' union rejected the offer, often unanimously. However after three weeks of no-work-no-pay, combined with worries about patients and learners, and demoralized, shrinking picket lines, the strikers lacked inspiration to continue the strike. After some days of uncertainty the strike was 'suspended'.

The political residues of the strike have not washed away easily, however. The Zuma regime is nervous about the ability of its alliance partner to control its members. They took it as a full frontal attack when Cosatu called a 'civil society conference' to which the ANC was not invited. Government's New Growth Path makes many promises to Cosatu and few concessions to its economic suggestions, while making a social pact – a new means of binding the unions – central. Less visible, but no less important, is the political residue in the minds of strikers. It is firstly evident that strikers have begun to generalize beyond their own sectoral issues. Strikers in 2010 sympathised with service delivery protests much more readily than in 2007. Secondly, strikers learned a hard lesson in the logic of the alliance and of collective bargaining. At least one striker felt that the strike became a lever for Vavi's own political ambitions. Finally, strikers in 2010 moved quickly to directly criticizing Zuma. The strike demonstrated that the contradictions are likely to unfold much more quickly for Zuma than for Mbeki.

¹ Government and the unions have failed to reach agreement on who is an essential worker.

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