

South Africa: Minimum wages can't end suffering when the rich abuse the poor

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May 12, 2018

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There has been a lot of talk about the promise of a National Minimum Wage (NMW) in South Africa. This means wages cannot go below a certain level. But capitalists and politicians continue to eat the food of the workers, the poor and unfortunate. Why? In some cases, the NMW is an improvement – but generally, the NMW is not a “living wage,” meaning a wage on which you can live a decent life. Prices keep going up. This society is based on the maximization of profit, this is its logic, and this means wages are not linked to what the workers and poor need, but to what bosses and politicians need. Wages are a system of exploitation. We live a capitalist society of stress and fear and jealousy, rooted in a system of cheap black labour, and power and profits for the bosses and politicians. We need to fight for something more, take back our unions, and lay the groundwork for an anarchists society, with equality based on workers and community councils.

STRESS AND FEAR

The workplace we have is not based on mutual aid (*ubuntu*), with people working together in harmony with each other to survive. It is based on feuds, due to people not being satisfied with what they earn, struggling under heavy workloads and overtime, and being squeezed by taxes like VAT (sales tax). This situation is squeezing workers dry, causing stress and conflict among workers, with finger pointing: who is working a better position and getting more pay? Is this because he or she has a good relation with the manager or supervisor? Meanwhile, management engages in massive retrenchments. The remaining workers end up working twice as hard for the same old wages. Wages are always lower than the value of work done under capitalism: this is exploitation. A NMW does not change that.

JOB LOSSES AS WEAPONS

At the end of 2017, there were massive job losses at Anglo-Ashanti Mine at Carletonville, on the West Rand, with the closure of two of the biggest shafts. This was an unfortunate turn of events for the miners: some were retrenched and others were pushed to take up a Voluntary Service Package (VSP). This is something very common in the mining sector: it downsizes workers and ruins their lives, and brutalizes their families, to make extra profit for the individuals who own and run the business. This devastates local mining-based black working class communities like Khutsong township.

THE MINING CRISIS

At Marikana, in Rustenburg, the 2012 massacre did not stop mine workers in the platinum mines. There was a massive strike some months later. Workers won a wage raise, but when all was done and dusted, thousands of jobs were lost afterwards.

This was to punish workers and ensure profits. So, people lost jobs after the successful negotiations for higher wages, which were led by the breakaway union, Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). Capitalists and economists and politicians saw the workforce as a problem, hampering capital and profit. They were right: higher wages do cut into profits.

But that shows the system is unfair, because it makes profits by paying people indecently, and by always paying less than the value of work done.

CHEAP BLACK LABOUR

Mines, like other sectors, were built on the backs of cheap black labour, a racist wage structure. Workplace structures were racist as well, with authoritarian management systems that controlled “general” workers in so-called unskilled jobs. This involved long hours at work for low pay, sometimes some of it kept back through various fines, deductions and cheating. More often than not, the worker was scared to claim the missing money.

The bosses want to keep this, post-apartheid, but in new ways: job losses, casualisation, police attacks, and crippling the unions. In the mining sector, which the lifeblood of places like Carletonville, word is going around that jobs are becoming scarce. Unemployment is massive. People will take any job they can get, even bribing to get it, no matter the wage.

The leadership of the former vanguard trade union, National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was corrupted by mine management and by the post-apartheid (the ruling African National Congress, ANC, has built a specially close link to the NUM leaders). At Carletonville, which is based on gold, NUM is still the main union.

But NUM numbers have been withering away. The biggest crisis for NUM is in platinum. Here AMCU, starting as a NUM breakaway, has become a powerful challenge to NUM. It rode the 2012–2013 strike wave. But it has serious internal issues: lack of democracy and very high salaries for top union leaders, this is exactly what workers complained about in NUM.

A NATIONAL CRISIS

Parliament talks about the corruption issues at leadership level, but the issue of massive job losses and the criminal nature of society based on exploitation and suffering is not addressed. There is not even a solution for people that lose their jobs. There is no welfare grant for the unemployed: only for children, pensioners and disabled.

Political parties talk “job creation” at elections but deliver nothing. Political parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have revived the NUM idea about employee share-ownership schemes (ESOPs) that would give some access to dividends and annual bonuses. But the money from shares comes from exploiting workers through the wage system, and falls when wages up. So ESOPs will actually punish workers for pushing wages up. They don’t ever involve enough shares to give real control, and don’t change the capitalism of the companies.

OCCUPY-RESIST-PRODUCE

What we anarchists/ syndicalists want is workers and their communities to take complete and direct control of the firms, mines and workshops. Then they can control the real wealth for the country, and use it to benefit the masses – not the agencies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank or big firms like Lonmin or Anglo-American, or the politicians, no matter the party.

Workers must be united and not divided, this will make them a formidable force within the workplace. With this will be born a new revolutionary workers movement. We need to take back the unions, fight harder and stop hoping politicians will save us. We need to fight for a living wage, at a level set by the working class through campaigns and open discussion, and then win it by mobilising. The NMW level was set from above, without our say, but as a deal between elites, and that is why it is not a living wage.

To take back the unions, we need to form a rank-and-file reform movement in the unions, all the unions, to rebuild real workers' control, independence from parties, and a fighting agenda for deep change. This means fighting by using daily struggles and education, and organising to build for a new anarchist/ syndicalist society of equality, workers and community councils – not more of the criminal system we have today. Politicians and parties are part of the problem, hand in glove with the bosses and capitalism and the state.

We need a movement of the working and poor masses.

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Retrieved on 5th August 2021 from anarkismo.net

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