

ANC imposes back to work drive amid sharp rise in South Africa's coronavirus cases

By Stephan McCoy
20 June 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is exposing the brutal reality of South African capitalism as thousands of workers become unemployed and the virus spreads rapidly in the townships.

Coronavirus cases are beginning to soar two weeks after the African National Congress (ANC) government of President Cyril Ramaphosa eased its draconian lockdown and ordered a return to work for June 1. More than 84,000 people—25 percent of Africa's confirmed cases—have now been infected with the virus, which has claimed the lives of almost 1,800 people.

Around 60 percent of those infected are in Western Cape province, with 12 percent of those infected in Khayelitsha, the largest township in Cape Town, despite having just 6 percent of the province's population. More prosperous neighbourhoods have largely escaped the virus, exposing the rampant inequality that pervades post-Apartheid South Africa.

According to the South African Centre for Epidemiological Modelling and Analysis, cases are expected to rise, peaking between early July and August. Some 35,000 to 50,000 South Africans could die from the virus.

Health Minister Zweli Mkhize warned health care workers that the pandemic had not reached its peak, acknowledging an increase since the lockdown was lifted and the need to take precautions to reduce the rate of spread and enable the hospitals to cope. Despite this, hospitals remain terribly ill-equipped as more and more health care workers are lost to quarantine and the virus itself. There have been numerous walkouts at hospitals and health care facilities over the lack of personal protective equipment.

While the two-month-long lockdown slowed the spread of the disease, it exacerbated the already desperate plight of millions of South African workers. South Africa's GDP, the largest in Africa, is expected to contract by 7

percent, while government debt was reduced to junk status in April and the rand fell by at least 18 percent against the US dollar. As a result, unemployment could rise to a staggering 50 percent by the end of this year. Unemployment, according to official figures, already stands at 30 percent, under conditions where youth unemployment was already 55 percent before the pandemic.

The 3 million informal workers, including cleaners, street vendors and garbage recyclers, the majority of workers in the townships, villages and countryside, have been unable to stay at home because it would mean they would have no money. They are now facing destitution. Most were already paid no more than \$63 a month. For this reason, the security forces were deployed to enforce lockdowns in the poor areas with high-density townships, where higher population numbers and overcrowding made it impossible to isolate.

The Ramaphosa government, like its counterparts around the world, provided little support for small businesses and the self-employed and did nothing to secure wages and the livelihoods of workers. The Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) that was supposed to have provided R40 billion (\$2.2 billion) in support to laid-off workers made hardly any payments. The government's refusal to deem the UIF an essential service during the lockdown made it impossible for most workers to walk into a UIF office to collect the loan, as it was closed. With many workers without access to the internet, symptomatic of the low-skilled nature of the economy, many were unable to access their loans online.

Agricultural workers are increasingly being threatened with unemployment due to the lockdown. The Land and Agricultural Development Bank of South Africa, which lends to both large commercial farmers and smallholders, is struggling to keep afloat after it failed to repay a key creditor. Increased borrowing from farmers as they

switched to capital intensive horticulture destined for export markets, and a reduction in its access to funding after its credit score was downgraded to junk status, eroded the bank's financial position, even as South Africa's credit rating was cut to junk. To avoid a default, the South African Treasury provided \$300 million worth of funding.

This comes after farm workers were forced to accept an abysmal 3.8 percent wage increase, raising the minimum wage from R17.97 to R18.68 per hour, instead of the 12.5 percent increase filed by the farm workers' union, much lower than workers themselves were demanding. Transvaal Agricultural Union President Louis Meintjes was forced to admit that it was "far below" the amount requested.

The South African ruling elite is also choosing to sacrifice thousands of airline jobs to keep the profits and the bank accounts of corporations healthy. Funding of the national airline, South African Airways (SAA), has been cut amid increased discussions of privatisation that would mean slashing hundreds of jobs. The unions even made an offer for workers' pay to be cut by 49 percent for two months to save the company.

An estimated 4,708 SAA workers did not receive their wages in May. Most staff were put on "unpaid absence," as the Ramaphosa government, the unions and management worked together to "restructure" while seeking to stifle any significant pushback from workers. Pilots are still being forced to fly repatriation flights for South Africans stuck in other countries after restrictions on international travel to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

All this comes as the ANC government mounts a criminal back-to-work drive, a move that has been opposed by municipal workers, bus drivers, metal workers and miners in wildcat actions against unsafe working conditions. At the same time, there have been demonstrations outside US missions in South African cities, condemning the killing of George Floyd by the police.

Plans to reopen schools have met with fierce resistance from parents and teachers over health concerns for children and a lack of adequate protection, forcing the government to postpone several times the reopening from June 1. Despite the government's claim that it was providing 7,000 touchless thermometers, 2.4 million masks and thousands of litres of sanitizer, many schools have been left without protection. According to *Times Live*, parents and residents in Mpumalanga shut down

Mbazima Primary School because it was unsafe, with the school lacking sanitizers, face masks or even soap and water for hand washing. Even after the school's closure, despite promising to clean the school and screen pupils, teachers and other staff members, the school's management failed to do so.

Several other schools have been forcibly shut down by parents because of dilapidated, unsafe, and unhygienic conditions. Many parents were forced to clean schools themselves as the government absolved itself of any responsibility to provide sanitary conditions.

In the Western Cape, 98 teachers have tested positive for the virus and 1,800 children have been infected, forcing 16 schools to close. In the Eastern Cape, 23 schools were forced to close amid reports of 48 suspected cases. Western Cape Minister of Education Debbie Schäfer tried to downplay this, saying, "1,537 cases were reported before the schools were reopened," although all the teachers had contracted the disease on returning to the classrooms.

Despite the anger of their members, the education unions responded meekly to the government's request not to disrupt its plans for the reopening of schools. Instead of calling an all-out strike to prevent the schools' reopening, they simply "urged" their members to defy the government's return-to-school order, saying schools did not yet have the PPE needed to keep educators and pupils safe.

Demonstrators gathered outside United States missions in South African cities on June 8 to condemn the killing of George Floyd, whose death in police custody has set off a wave of protests worldwide and ignited a debate about race and injustice.

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