

2007 and 2010 public sector strikes

Maturing contradictions

The public sector strikes in 2007 and 2010 unfolded in differing political contexts.

Claire Ceruti explores these different conditions and brings out the contradictions for labour leadership and for strikers while examining if there has been a shift in strikers' political understanding of their position in relation to government.

The 20-day public sector strike involving teachers and nurses last year brought the number of strike days in South Africa to their highest since the end of apartheid, and probably the highest in the history of South Africa. By September 2010 there had been about 14 million strike days. The second-most strike prone year was 2007, and public sector strikers made up the bulk of the strikers then as well.

In 2007 then President Thabo Mbeki was on his way out while Jacob Zuma backed by the trade union federation Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) was riding towards the presidency on the wave of delivery protests, strikes and discontent within the ANC (African National Congress). In this strike, strikers settled for much less than the 12% they originally wanted, but with the ANC's 52nd National Conference in Polokwane already on the horizon, strikers deferred their hopes to political change.

The 2010 strike was in many senses a test of this strategy in the new political context under the leadership of Zuma. The way the strike unfolded was conditioned by the change in the Alliance of Cosatu/

ANC and SACP (South African Communist Party) that followed Polokwane to supposedly favouring labour.

MOOD IN 2007 & 2010 STRIKES

In the 2007 strike, the mood of public sector union officials meshed with the mood of many of their members. Union leaders were feeling increasingly alienated from the Mbeki government, which was doing little to stop a bloodbath of job losses. Union members felt excluded from Mbeki's 'economic turnaround' in the pinch of rising prices and high unemployment, despite their image as middle-class professionals.

In 2010, by contrast, the strike was forced on reluctant union leaders by members. Some strikers said there had been little preparation for the strike, because no one was expecting a strike. Promises had been made at the Polokwane conference to address the problems of public sector workers and union negotiators believed they were meeting comrades at the negotiating table.

In the previous year 2009, minister Richard Baloyi had agreed easily to above-budget wage adjustments. In 2010, however, government

negotiators were counting on their comrades in the unions to convey the message to their members that government coffers were depleted by the Fifa World Cup. The unions had, after all, politely agreed to hold off industrial action until after the Cup.

For teachers and nurses and for the hospital cleaner who had to buy her own mop three times that year, the meaning of the World Cup was quite different – if there was money for celebration parties, then there should be money for essentials.

With the change within the Alliance strikers had expected Zuma's government to side with them, and therefore could not accept the government's 'final offer' of 7% against the unions' demand of 8.6%. One striker made a placard during the 2010 strike illustrating what the wage battle implied for him: 'Comrades are like buttocks. When they part, 7% (shit) comes out'. This low offer was all the more insulting delivered as it was the day after a one-day warning strike where people carried placards reminding Baloyi who taught him to read. Since government then unilaterally ended negotiations, the only way to reject the offer was by striking.

As in the 2007 strike, the strikers were tumbled into an even more contradictory relationship with government. Government was both the enemy of their demands, as well as claiming to represent the poor and hence those striking for more pay. It was also a government that strikers, other workers and the poor had delivered to power.

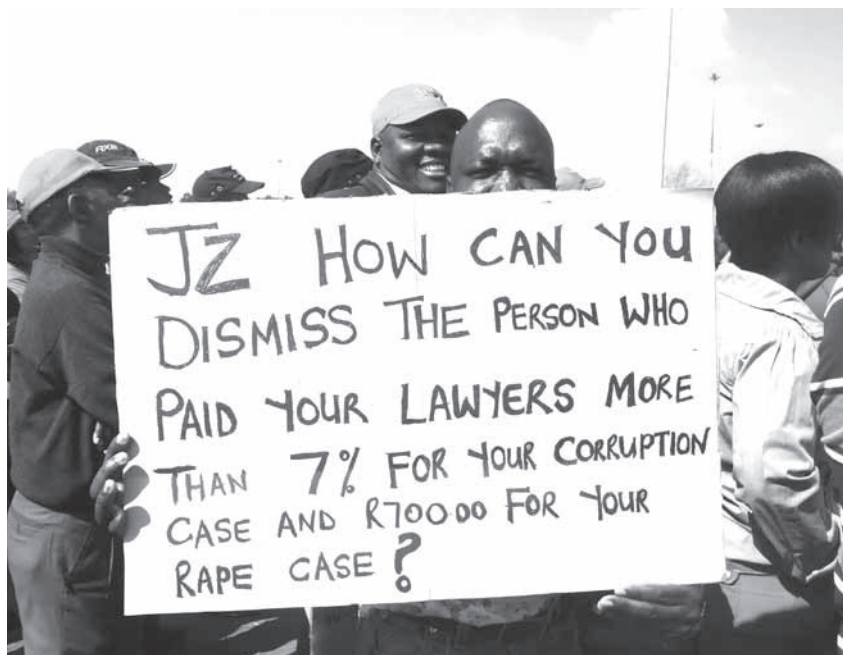
The 2007 strike had picked up on the theme of accountability expressed in service delivery protests and also the growing revolt inside the ANC (although few strikers openly identified with the delivery protestors). The strikers' ambiguity to government was expressed as betrayal in their placards: 'We put them where they are and look how they treat us' and threats to withdraw their support from government: 'No 12 percent, no vote, no world cup'.

In the 2010 strike, placards like the one cautioning Zuma to 'remember Polokwane promises' were also reminders that the people could take down a leader from where they had put him. Another important shift was that the 2010 strikers showed more understanding of the delivery protestors than in the 2007 strike.

Strikers put Zuma on the spot very quickly in the 2010 strike, and much more explicitly than they had with Mbeki in 2007.

One 2010 striker complained, even before the strike had started: 'Zuma promised us a lot of things but I see nothing, nothing has happened'. Nevertheless, many other strikers started off with the faith that Zuma would set the minister Baloyi on the right course when the matter was brought to his attention. Such faith was shattered a few days into the strike when Zuma asserted on national television that the government could fire workers who did not return to work.

A few strikers had their faith briefly restored when Zuma ordered government negotiators back to the table late in the strike, but many



more went home and made placards directed at Zuma which reminded him that a teacher 'wiped his funny nose', warning him not to bring home any more wives from his state visit to China and wondering whether he could support five wives on a teacher's income. Songs sung about both Zuma and minister Baloyi such as 'uskebereshe' (slut), were both insulting and also implied somebody who sells themselves to the highest bidder.

But by the end of the 2010 strike such sentiments had been dampened and deferred to battles in the policy realm. The most unsettling experience for many strikers came when Zwelinzima Vavi, Cosatu's general secretary, recommended a settlement on national radio before members had been told about it. Momentarily, Vavi's loyalties were called into question - was he representing government to the workers, or vice versa?

The settlement was widely rejected in strike meetings, but nevertheless within a week all unions had signed an agreement, starting with the smaller, non-Cosatu unions. Union leaders and Cosatu clearly faced a different set of contradictions in relation to government.

CAUGHT IN CONTRADICTIONS

Despite Cosatu members, including public sector workers' key role in propelling Zuma to the presidency, by 2010 they had seen little reward in terms of government policies such as their demand that labour brokers be outlawed. This meant that by the time of the 2010 strike, relations between Alliance partners were a little strained. The Cosatu Central Executive Committee produced a statement some weeks before the strike stating that 'the Alliance is once again dysfunctional', and lambasting 'predatory elites' in the ANC.

Vavi repeated these sentiments again to workers during the strike, leading a government spokesperson, Themba Maseko, to complain that 'We are beginning to see and hear too many statements that are taking the strike beyond labour relations. It worries us.'

On the other hand, the restoration of the Alliance locked union leaders back into the logic of collective bargaining with a political edge. They were influenced by strategic considerations related to the Alliance. Vavi had backed Zuma expecting to change things *through* the Alliance, and in this strategy



the next crucial hope was that the ANC would adopt Cosatu's new economic growth path document. This agenda had to balance an outright loss of strike demands with an all-or-nothing showdown with those expected to consider the document at the upcoming ANC national general council. Vavi therefore played a role in settling the strike that was as much pragmatic mediator as strikers' representative.

The settlement signed by union leaders had in fact been widely, and often unanimously, rejected in strike meetings. The top-down settlement had a hugely negative impact on strikers: when talking about it they were agitated or seriously depressed.

Nevertheless, strikers were often simultaneously relieved that the strike was over. Despite rejecting the deal the strikers had not built

the power to defeat it. Loss of pay was a real problem by day 20 of the strike and the picket lines had shrunk.

The virulent media campaign against hospital picket lines had also left the strikers feeling isolated. A strike in schools and hospitals is hard to sustain without a broader support campaign amongst learners and the communities served by hospitals. Unfortunately neither union leaders nor significant groups of strikers had the strategic imagination to build such a group. In the 2007 strike, some attempts to build a strike support committee were made in Soweto; in 2010 the solidarity campaign did not extend beyond gathering statements of support.

The strike was also weakened by the fact that although union leaders strategised together, strikers met separately according to sector and union.

Gauteng teachers, for example, were resolutely against the suspension of the strike but were not able to give courage to the dejected and confused groups of hospital workers contemplating acceptance of the deal, nor were they able to strategise together.

As in the 2007 strike, strikers were extremely militant but they lacked the strategic vision to go beyond the leaders' focus on the negotiating table. The Left outside of the Alliance was invisible in the strike while the Left inside the Alliance was not independently organised.

For example, the Gauteng region of Sadtu (South African Democratic Teachers Union) resisted the deal even at a leadership level, but once the other unions had signed the talk of recalling leaders turned into rhetoric, replaced instead by a strategy of squeezing as many concessions as possible from the return to work. This was a good strategy but it was embarked on without striking teachers ever admitting that they had lost this strike round or discussing whether there was any way to sustain the strike.

CONCLUSION

Between the strike in 2007 and the next in 2010, strikers had built their confidence to make demands on government, and had begun to see that their issues related to those of the much poorer and distant service delivery protestors in communities. However, no coherent strategic alternative emerged to pull together these changing interpretations into a wider analysis, which situated Zuma's unsatisfactory response to the strikers within the bigger themes of nationalism and capitalism. The contradictions remain, but they have for the moment been suppressed. ¹⁶

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