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Crouching comrades, hidden dialogue

Interpreting the public service strike

Was it a political strike? Where did government underestimate or trip over its own feet? Why hasn't government shared relevant information with trade unions? What was the cost to society? What is the possible significance of the strike? These are some of the questions that **Ebrahim-Khalil Hassen** explores in this thoughtful article around the June public service strike

The Chinese have a saying 'like a coiling dragon and a crouching tiger' to represent a forbidding strategic point. The saying provided the title for the martial arts classic 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'. The film marks a departure from the good versus bad stories in action movies, introducing philosophical reflections,

challenging gender roles and ending with ambiguity. Afflicting blows in martial arts resonates with the 2007 public service strike, and sometimes the toyi-toyi of workers came close to the grace of martial arts.

However, it is the contest between strong unions, and a strong government that raises the possibility of an inviting, rather

than the current forbidding, strategic point for public service reform. Can the strike catalyse a systemic change in relations between government and unions, which in turn improves service delivery and redistribution by the public service? Or is it simply a case of dragons spitting fire, and tigers sharpening claws?

POLITICAL STRIKE

In a year in which succession for the African National Congress presidency dominates public imagination, there have been attempts to link the strike to succession battles.

Some argue that the strike represents a '12% push for Jacob Zuma', a reference both to support for Zuma and the initial wage demand of unions. Given a highly charged, contested but insulated process of selecting leadership in the ANC the temptation to link the strike with ANC politics is understandable. There are sections across the Tripartite Alliance that argue that 'all roads lead to Polokwane' (venue of ANC national congress). However, this grouping has failed to exert as strong an influence over the strike as has been suggested. Media reports tell that attempts to sing slogans supporting one 'candidate' were met with muted responses from workers, and unionists have been tough on propaganda advancing this or that candidate. Instead, the strike is political in the sense of unions attempting to reconfigure power relations.

The public sector has been a battleground between unions and government. This strike follows strikes in Transnet, local government, and the public service itself. Furthermore, general strikes called by Cosatu have supported its anti-privatisation stance, and jobs and poverty campaigns have targeted government and the private sector. In this sense, the strike is not unusual as it represents a wide gulf between organised workers and the state on economic policy, salaries and restructuring.

Unions have often lost these battles, captured in the unilateral implementation of wages in 1999 by the Minister of Public Service and Administration. The unilateral

implementation marked a turning point in the power balance between unions and government in the Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council.

Underlying the unilateral implementation was an attack on unions. The ANC released its infamous 'Briefing Notes' which argued that unions (read Cosatu) were playing a too political role, and that they were antagonistic to the democratic government. Unions however argued that there were fundamental challenges that workers and the unemployed were facing, resulting in unions developing strategies to resist what some call 'neo-liberal restructuring'. Over the years, public service unions have recognised that power in collective bargaining has swung to the employer and they have grappled with finding conditions that will alter the power relations.

At a macro-level, there is a remarkable consensus across different union federations that workers have not done as well as they could. Workers' share of a growing economy has proven a mechanism on which to build solidarity across racial and historical divides in organised labour.

Unions in the public sector reflect the heterogeneity of identities, histories and perspectives amongst trade unions. Crudely these are unions that have roots in staff associations created under apartheid, and the so-called 'struggle unions'. Traditionally this meant that white workers belonged to one union, and black workers to another.

In previous bargaining rounds, strike action has been limited by the unwillingness of unions outside Cosatu to undertake protracted action. In the current strike, two contending forces have coalesced to build common platforms. The first is that bruising battles between

government and unions has made workers battle-hardened, a key requirement to building a wider working class identity. The second trend is that during wage negotiations there have been two strong coordinating centres amongst unions – Cosatu and the Independent Labour Caucus – which has facilitated joint action and decision making whilst providing the different unions space to debate within their traditions.

Even under these conditions however, the ability of public service workers to mobilise has always been questioned. It was thought that public service workers would not go out for more than a day or two because they were better off than other workers, or because they lacked the harshness of the capitalist process to radicalise their consciousness. It was customary in union circles to speak of public service workers having a 'false consciousness' or to describe them as an 'elephant that could not even trample grass'. After three weeks of strike action and high levels of unity across unions, public service workers are finally beginning to flex their muscle.

More significantly, this is a strike that has been driven from below.

In discussions with national union leaders and shop stewards, one of the difficulties in settling at a particular wage has been pressure from below. Whilst it is common in strikes for workers to overestimate their bargaining position through seeing institutions not working and the camaraderie of marching beside other workers, in this strike union leadership has underestimated the commitment of workers on the ground. This is not a romantic statement of workers being more radical than their leaders, but rather that there has been a radicalisation of public service workers. Worker leaders in communities have been at

the forefront of resisting the imposition of political agendas, and scoffing at suggested settlements.

While workers have sought to sharpen contradictions, government's communications strategy marks a change from the bluster of previous strikes, with an emphasis on reaching agreement. A concerted media offensive only came after the end of the first week of the strike, possibly due to government assuming that the strike would fizzle out after two days. Moreover, due to government's unwillingness to sign essential services agreements, there might have been an assumption that service delivery would not be affected. Even when dismissal letters were issued, government advanced a balanced perspective. One explanation might be that the media missed the realities that the succession battles might affect those in power, more than workers.

MANDATES FOR CHANGE

The Department of Public Service Administration (DPSA) must recognise that public service reform will require the support of unions. The development of the 'occupational specific dispensation' (OSD) is broadly consistent with labour proposals tabled at the Public Service Jobs Summit.

The OSD is an attempt to regrade jobs in the public service so as to attract people and retain skills in the public service. It offers an opportunity for unions to negotiate the value of jobs, and implement the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. This is important as public service workers, especially teachers and nurses are underpaid in relation to their counterparts in the private sector, as well as the international market for their skills.

Ironically, this marks the DPSA's first significant mandate for change in grading structures since 1999. It

is however a case of too little, too late as unions have not been consulted on highly developed proposals. Without a process of engagement, ideally outside bargaining chambers, the broad trajectory of public service reform cannot be developed. A shared stance is needed if public service reform is to be systemic, and to focus on using the service to break poverty.

Whilst a government and union coalition for change is an important element of implementing a reform programme, in the cut and thrust of salary negotiations it is the mandates of politicians that matters. Government's mandating committee, consisting of several ministers, did not provide the flexibility and leadership to their negotiators to continue negotiations. Consequently, there was a long delay in government revising its opening offer. This time delay of around two months provided an important space for union organisers to mobilise their constituencies. More importantly, it limited dialogue on key features of a possible settlement in areas where government had done extensive work, such as in the health sector where there are well developed proposals for grading workers, and for career progression. This showed poor leadership of negotiations and weakened government's ability to keep unions at the table.

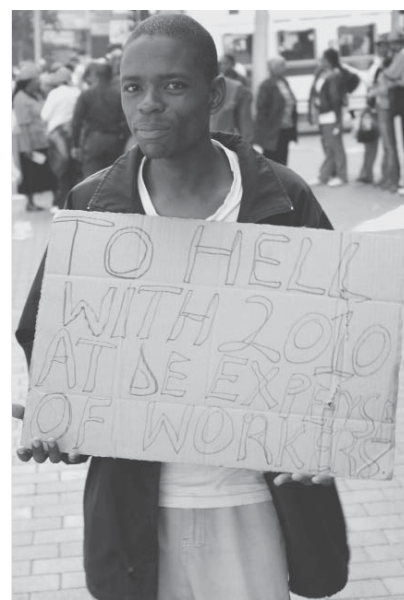
TIMING AND VALUES

Strikes are tactical – an instrument to move an agenda. Once government had tabled a revised offer, there was significant movement. As the strike bit, government moved first from 5.3% to 6.5%, then 7.25% and then to 7.5% based on mediators' proposals.

The movement over three weeks was astonishing, given the need to balance its budget, and increase



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social spending. A percentage increase amounted to about R1,8 billion. In addition, workers made gains through the housing subsidy which was revised upwards.

There is thus little doubt that government either underestimated the intensity of strike action, or alternatively was forced to move from the position of an inflation linked increase only to an actual percentage increase. It raises questions on what guides government in wage negotiations. Government's bargaining strategy perceives workers as representing a narrow interest that would be uninterested in a broader reform programme. However, in a polarised society unions have a strong voice on policy issues and thus have wider social interests. Government needs to represent the values of a developmental state that both includes powerful social actors, and leads the country.

Unions also need to reflect on the values they bring to the table. Government and unions have agreed to establish the Government Employees Medical Scheme (GEMS). It represents an important step towards creating a publicly provided medical aid. Yet, unions with an explicitly socialist position have been arguing for benefits which are placed with strictly private sector medical aid companies. Unions might have legitimate concerns on GEMS' benefits and coverage, but these are outweighed by the need to transform medical insurance from the preserve of selected private companies, to more publicly accessible provisions. It is the task of union leaders to convince the small but vocal sections of workers to move into GEMS, rather than remain with private providers.

One area that raises ethical dilemmas is the question of essential services. Many have questioned the work ethic of essential workers who

have left their jobs. It is easy to become incredulous at a nurse leaving her station where there are sick people. On the other hand, unions argue that government has failed to sign essential services agreements. This, according to unions, is a strategy for government to keep strike numbers small as most health and policing jobs are classified essential services. These are complex ethical questions including why nurses would risk dismissal as they are unprotected, according to some legal opinions. These ethical ambiguities need to be resolved through essential services agreements.

A surprising feature of the strike has been that public support has tended towards trade unions. South Africans share a sense that workers in teaching, nursing and policing should be paid more.

IMPACTS

Beyond the usual bickering over numbers of workers on strike, there are indications that the strike had major impacts. Most surprisingly, is that the usually docile ANC parliamentary caucus questioned ministers as to why they were not kept informed and castigated government for negotiating in bad faith. The inability of parliament to have a meaningful impact on the strike must raise questions around participatory governance and its ability to hold the executive accountable.

Parliament however serves as a point to record military deployments. President Mbeki indicated that 300 000 military personnel were deployed. They provided security and support services to keep public services running.

The economic impact was measured half-way into the strike at around R3 billion according to asset management companies. Moreover, there were significant disruptions to

normal business operations, with at least one company indicating a disruption directly linked to the strike. However, markets were unmoved by the strike and had little impact on the JSE. It reminds unions that even in the face of the largest strike since democracy it will take a lot more to shake capital. The wider impact of the strike on economics, is that the question of 'political uncertainty' was raised by credit agencies as a growing risk. The strike might feed into a picture of growing political uncertainty, ostensibly because we have not figured out questions around succession.

Trevor Manuel summarised the broader costs to society thus, "You may be saving money on bandages and drugs not administered and salaries not paid but I think there are different kinds of costs that you need to be aware of in society."

Obviously in the strike context there is an element of propaganda to tell the public about uncaring workers, but Minister Manuel is right that there are wider costs. Public services are mainly used by working class communities. The question these communities need to ask is, "Are there enough drugs and bandages to provide an excellent service on a normal day?" The answer in many cases is no. It is this daily reality that unions and government must address. It is this common goal of a public service that breaks poverty traps that might turn the public service strike from a forbidding strategic point, to an inviting one. LB

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