

The hammer falls

Thousands of jobs are set to be lost in the public sector, as government embarks on a rightsizing exercise. Virtually all central and provincial government departments will be affected. While accurate figures of the number of jobs under threat are not available, some analysts estimate that a staggering two-thirds of current posts will have to be abolished to meet the government's budget targets.

The education sector - including schools, universities and technikons - has been particularly hard hit. About 6 170 temporary teachers in historically black schools face the axe as a result of education minister Sibusiso Bhengu's decision to scrap national class-size norms and the teacher redeployment programme. Each province will have to develop its own cost-cutting measures. The retrenchment figure was reduced from 41 000 and a three month reprieve was granted by all provincial departments except the Western Cape after SADTU threatened mass action last month.

Subsidy cuts at tertiary institutions could see a more vigorous drive to privatise 'non-core' support operations like cleaning and catering. About 5 000 non-academic workers at the universities of Fort Hare, Potchefstroom and Natal, and Pretoria Technikon have already lost their jobs through this process.

Budget constraints

Government allocated 37% of its total budget to the public service last year. More than 80% of this was spent on the payment

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of salaries and benefits, with the remainder going to administration and materials. It is anticipated that the total budget allocation to the public service will be reduced by between eight and 12% in the coming financial year, in line with the austerity measures prescribed by GEAR.

Public Service Commission deputy director-general, Neva Makgetla, commenting in *Business Day* (14/1/98), concedes that the voluntary severance programme - the cornerstone of the rightsizing exercise - has failed. Until July last year, voluntary retrenchments were accepted by all parties to the three year framework agreement for the public service as the preferred route to restructure the public service. It soon became clear, however, that government could not pay for the programme.

Cabinet is expected to give the go-ahead for retrenchments soon. It is expected that workers who are retrenched will be offered a package equivalent to between six and 12 months salary, plus pension benefits and a social plan. Employees who opted for the voluntary severance package received four to five years' salary.

Casualties

It is too soon to tell whether the trade unions will buy into the latest proposal.

Concern is mounting within the unions that the government will enforce the scheme whether they like it or not.

Public Service Association (PSA) general secretary, Casde van Rensburg, believes 50 000 workers will face the axe. He points out that the bulk of these will be lower echelon workers.

Alternatives

The PSA, FEDUSA and COSATU argue that the government has not adequately considered alternative measures to prevent retrenchments. The unions have proposed a 'redeployment plan' based on 'occupational categories at a national level'.

SADTU general secretary, Thulas Nxesi, says that the trouble with the current redeployment scheme is that it is limited to departments and provinces. He says central government, and the national education department in particular, have failed to take decisive action on redeployments. "If a teacher or administrative clerk in Gauteng wishes to be redeployed, the person's options are confined to the relevant province, or, in the case of the administrative clerk, to the department," says Nxesi.

SADTU and NEHAWU have insisted on a data base and proper audit of the public

service which identifies needs, areas where workers are located and where retrenchments are necessary.

Another proposal is that unions be given powers to negotiate budget allocations. The current budgetary process, which allocates money to each province and department, pre-empts cross-subsidisation according to needs. Says Nxesi: "A national approach would allow provinces and departments to redress imbalances between provinces by shifting money and human resources away from areas of surplus to areas of shortage."

Unilateral restructuring

The unions see government's failure to grasp the concept of restructuring through redeployment as a major obstacle. NEHAWU spokesperson, Joe Lekola, says that: "Restructuring is happening outside the transformation agenda which, in turn, is causing retrenchments. The government tends to act unilaterally. There is no direction at the national level and the process is frustrated by provincial and departmental bureaucracies and administrative chaos."

Last month, it was agreed that there would be 'exploratory talks' between the parties, with a view to dealing with the current crisis in line with the principles set out in the three year framework agreement. The agreement prohibits unilateral restructuring and imposes a moratorium on forced retrenchments and new appointments from outside the public service.

In the meantime, the fate of public service workers remains an open question. Nxesi warns that "If the government does not recognise the concerns of public servants and deal in a pro-active way with the fallout from the budget crisis, it must face the consequences of poor service delivery and possible industrial action." ★

Employment declines

Figures just released by the Central Statistical Services (CSS) reveal that 41 000 jobs were lost in the public service between September 1996 and September 1997.

Central government shed 9 800 jobs. While there was a slight increase in employment figures for local authorities in the last quarter of the year under review, during the first nine months they posted a decline of 4 600 jobs.

Economists have welcomed this news, saying that it shows that government is committed to a reduction in spending.