

“They think we are barbarians” Security strikers speak

SALB interviewed a group of Satawu security workers ten weeks into their strike. We probed to find out workers’ deeper grievances and how they have survived over the long strike.



Press reports commented that you will lose more money in this long strike than you will get back in wage hikes over a number of years. So why is this strike so important for you?

We are deeply dissatisfied in very many ways although these may not all be reflected in the strike demands. Our demands were for four months paid maternity leave, an 11% increase, a four day working week because we work 12 hour shifts, benefits such as medical aid and provident fund, lunch and other breaks, study leave to take exams and family responsibility leave. But we have many other grievances.

Firstly, companies often ignore the Security Sectoral Determination. The Determination allows for long working hours but does not allow for breaks of any kind. We often work 6am to 6pm with no break not even for lunch, a 12 hour straight shift.

There are complaints if we desert our posts to get some food, or do a quick shop or post something. We often work alone and if there are no toilets nearby we get complaints when we go to the toilet that we are not on duty. We are fined R500 if we desert our posts. Sometimes they suspend you for a certain period for offences then you are not paid for that period. Companies can simply fire you and find some unemployed person to easily take your place. They say the client is always right. You can never give your side of the story.

Also, if you are sick you can get fined for arriving late for sickness. Jabu (Mbongwa) was fined R260 when he was sick. They make their very own laws and don’t comply with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

When you work for a small company it is even worse. Often supervisors are foreign, such as

Zimbabweans, and they are very hard on local people. In small companies also sometimes you don’t get paid for three months in a row. They also deduct for uniforms, which the Determination says employers should provide. In fact, even large companies deduct for uniforms and then you have to return the uniform when you leave the company.

There are many fly by nights in the business that make a quick buck and disappear. They don’t register. They don’t deduct UIF, or give payslips. Many of these are run by ex-SAPS police and soldiers so they harass, threaten and victimise you. You hear all the time “I’ll dismiss you. I’ll charge you.”

If there are strong shop stewards in the workplace they can prevent you being fired. If not, you can take it to the CCMA but then often employers delay in taking you back. Or if the CCMA says to the employer

you must pay out the worker the employer just never pays. You often don't get paid out if you're fired.

We make such a nice agreement with the employers around what should go into the Determination then companies turn around and say, "We have our own policies" and this clashes with the Determination. There is a lot of frustration in this industry. The description in a contract is drawn up by the contracting company and we never see it. It is chaos in the industry. Employers take advantage of people not knowing their rights.

There is a private regulatory authority called SIRA (Security Industry Regulatory Authority). You have to register with them to work in the industry and they deduct R7,98 every month from your pay. They give you training and a registration certificate so you can work in the industry but they never investigate what is happening in the industry or do an evaluation. There are even government people owning or having shares in these security companies but there are no better conditions in these companies.

On the question of maternity leave when you come back there is often no post or you are moved somewhere else far from your home to work. This often involves much greater costs in transport. If you go on maternity leave before being paid for the months you will be off, the company doesn't pay you while you are absent. You just get the UIF amount and no top up. Our demand is for four month's maternity leave at the basic salary rate.

This is what we earn per month in different categories:
 Grade E (lowest) - R 1 500 (guard)
 Grade D - R1 580 (controller)
 Grade C - R1 780 (admin worker)
 Grade B - R2 280 (supervisor)
 Grade A - R2 590 (site manger)

Often other grades, especially, Grade D and Grade C are paid at Grade E level. Most guards are earning at Grade E level.

So the strike is about better working conditions for the industry not just about the immediate demands. This strike is about our dignity. It's about us and employers showing us some respect.

What else is this strike about?

On the radio the other day it said, "At least you must try and have a security job if you are an unemployed man." They don't say that about street cleaners or any other job.

The way employers treat us it gives the message that other people can treat us like that. A lot of people these days are educated in the industry. You have to have a Grade 10 or above to get into the industry now. In some cases we have better education levels than employers. If employers had respected us none of this would have happened. They think we are barbarians and don't have families and belong to a community.

We have always been happy to negotiate. They can't even show us the respect of negotiating with us. We are responsible people. Employers can afford R166 extra a month per worker. Our transport can almost eat up our whole salary. It is white and BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) companies, they all exploit us. Why is it so difficult to sit round a table and talk? All they can say is, "Call off the strike and we'll talk." If we call off the strike we'll all be dismissed and they won't talk to us anyway.

We want to be taken as human beings, as responsible mothers and parents. Employers dehumanise us. When George (Moloi) had an accident in the company vehicle the first words of the employer were, "How's my car?" We are not human

beings to them. While in trauma after a robbery they take you for a polygraph (lie detector test). Even though you are still bloody. They make you a suspect and you were the one protecting the site.

Even the cleaners are given more respect than us.

You have been on strike for ten weeks, how have you survived?

Friends and family support us. Our families have been supportive and encouraging. You know it's so little money we earn it hardly makes a difference. It only lasts two days when you get it. You can draw money for two days and then it's finished.

Some newspapers talk of us taking loans. Mainly we don't take loans because we know we can never manage to pay it back. Anyway, you won't get a loan because they ask for a pay slip and we can't get one.

In the case of instalments we are paying off for furniture and other things, the union sent letters to explain and so the shop accepts that you cannot pay anything for that month.

We don't get money from a strike fund because this is for the union to pay any legal cases that may come up during the strike.

Our communities are not so supportive. People don't really understand what a strike is. It's not easy to raise money because people just see a killer if you talk to them. The media doesn't explain our position well and most of the youth don't understand and support us. People look down on security guards.

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Security guards interviewed were Innocentia Tisana (Brendton Security), Nomonde Mngeni (Chubb Security), Edwin Nkadimeng (Protea Security), Jabu Mbongwa (Afri-Guard), George K Moloi (Securicor Group).