

National Elections in South Africa: ANC Political Campaigning Raises Tensions

Platinum workers continues strike while service delivery demonstrations hit townships

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A date for national elections has been set in the Republic of South Africa for May 7. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) will mark two decades in power hoping to maintain control of the post-apartheid state.

Rallies for the ANC in various parts of the country have been met with enthusiasm from the people. An election manifesto is calling for a jobs-creation program for six million and the acceleration of land reform which has been stalled since 1994.

Nonetheless, there are attempts to build an electoral opposition to the national liberation movement turned political party. The Democratic Alliance (DA) headed by Helen Zille organized a demonstration to the national headquarters of the ANC at Luthuli House in Johannesburg.

The march almost resulted in serious violence between thousands of DA supporters and members of the ruling party who had come to Luthuli House to defend the headquarters from what they perceived as a hostile political attack. Some ANC Youth League members were reported to have carried bricks and police utilized crowd control tactics to restrain members from ruling party and the largest opposition bloc in parliament, the DA. (SABC, Feb. 12)

Zille is the former mayor of Cape Town and has sought to recruit Africans into the opposition party which is perceived as being a white-dominated alliance between former Nationalist Party members, liberals and opportunistic elements who are disgruntled with the ANC. The DA announced that former Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) activist, Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, a comrade of the martyred leader Steve Biko killed by the apartheid state in 1977, would run on the DA ticket after a merger with her own Agang party.

This short-lived political marriage of convenience ended before it started. Acrimony was expressed between Zille and Ramphele.

The Role of Workers and Youth in the Electoral Process

The ANC is seeking to appeal directly to the so-called “born frees” generation that came into existence after the first non-racial democratic elections of 1994. It is also essential that the party garners the majority of the working class vote throughout the country.

A strike in the main platinum-producing region in the world in the northwest is a major

factor in the upcoming elections and the overall economic future of South Africa. 80,000 miners who are members of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have been on strike for nearly four weeks.

Platinum prices have declined in recent years although the impact in production during the strike may raise prices. Recently the owners of Anglo-American Platinum (Amplats) filed court papers against AMCU to end the strike.

A spokesperson for Amplats, which is the world's largest producer of the strategic mineral, said that "There are increased costs to pay protection services staff overtime, damage to property, and losses occasioned by the loss of production because non-striking workers are being prevented from going to work," Mpumi Sithole told Reuters. "There is evidence of illegal actions of violence and intimidation and breaching of the picketing rules," she said. (Feb. 16)

An article published in the Financial Times illustrates that Amplats and other platinum owners are preparing for a protracted struggle with organized labor. These developments will test the ANC in its ability to resolve the current crisis in the industry where the bosses have threatened to lay-off up to 14,000 workers.

This Financial Times article says that "The platinum price is still more than 35 per cent below its record high reached almost six years ago. The market has been weighed down by large above-ground stocks and failed attempts by miners such as Amplats, responsible for 40 per cent of world supply, to reduce output." (Feb. 17)

With specific reference to the ruling party and its bid to remain politically dominant in South Africa, the same article notes

"Concerned by job losses set against a backdrop of an unemployment rate that is close to a quarter of the working population, the ruling African National Congress has kept pressure on companies to keep mines open. At the same time, Europe's automotive industry has experienced the worst slump in sales for about two decades. However, the outlook has started to brighten, say analysts. "

AMCU is a staunch rival of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) which was previously the largest affiliate of the two million-member Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), an ally of the ruling ANC that was formed at the height of the liberation struggle in 1985. AMCU appears to be opposed to the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) and their influence within the trade union movement.

Reuters observed of the situation that

"AMCU has emerged as the dominant union on South Africa's platinum belt over the past two years after poaching tens of thousands of members from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which is allied to the ruling African National Congress. The vicious union turf war erupted into violence in the platinum sector last year and has killed dozens of people. In August 2012, police shot dead 34 striking AMCU miners at Lonmin's Marikana mine, South Africa's bloodiest security incident since the end of apartheid in 1994. The killings spooked investors and hit the country's credit ratings." (Feb. 16)

At the same time the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) secretary-general Irwin Jim said that his labor organization, which is currently the largest COSATU affiliate, would not support the ANC in the upcoming May 7 elections. It is not clear what impact the NUMSA electoral position will have on their members and supporters.

The NUMSA position on the ANC, SACP and COSATU alliance is that the interests of the working class is being subordinated to the maintenance of state power by the ruling party. NUMSA is demanding a special national congress of COSATU to address the suspension of former secretary-general Zwelinzima Vavi, who has been accused of violating union rules and acting in a manner that is not above reproach.

NUMSA has nine affiliates which supports its view while other affiliates of COSATU have called for Vavi to be disciplined within the trade union federation structures. COSATU's current leadership has severely criticized the posture of NUMSA and questioned whether it should be expelled.

These divisions within COSATU and the role of AMCU in the platinum sectors raised a number of questions in light of the upcoming elections and the future of working class politics. Will NUMSA eventually call for the formation of an independent labor party as an alternative to the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance or is it prepared to stay within the coalition a fight for its views?

In addition, what impact will the AMCU-led strikes have on the mobilizations by the ANC for the May 7 vote? Will the working class in South Africa, which is 70 percent unorganized outside of any union, be influenced within the electoral arena by the political struggles taking place within the labor movement and the attacks on the ANC by the DA?

These debates and political struggles within the union movement are coupled with the continuing unrest in the townships over service delivery issues. The ANC is seeking to run on its record of home constructions, affirmative action within government and private industry, the building of a rapid transit train system, healthcare reforms and its influence in foreign policy areas such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), its entry into the Brazil, India, China, Brazil and now South Africa Summit (BRICS), the hosting of the World Soccer Cup in 2010, among other developments.

Nonetheless, there are still millions which remain without adequate housing, public education, utility services, living wages, land and environmentally safe communities and municipalities. The DA is attempting to utilize these realities and channel them into an electoral campaign that will weaken the ANC's two-thirds majority within the national parliament.

Reuters conveyed in a recent article that "Zuma, whose popularity has dipped in polls ahead of general elections on May 7, also touched on a recent wave of violent protests by residents of black townships unhappy with their living conditions. In the last three months, South Africa has seen around 30 'service delivery' protests a day, but Zuma put a positive spin on the unrest, saying it was a sign of government success creating higher expectations among communities." (Feb. 13)

This same report quotes President Zuma as pointing out that

"When 95 percent of households have access to water, the 5 percent who still

need to be provided for feel they cannot wait a moment longer. Success is also the breeding ground of rising expectations.”

South Africa has the largest economy and working class on the continent of Africa. The outcome of the May 7 elections will portend much for the immediate future of the class struggle in Africa.

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