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South Africa

Disillusionment and an explosion of workers' struggles

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The intensity of the struggles and debates that marked the traditional period of South African labour negotiations in June and July suggested that it that would end with important decisions. This was the case...

For five weeks the strike of metalworkers pitted the majority union NUMSA, which is the metalworkers' federation of the COSATU confederation, against SEIFSA and NEASA, the two employers' organizations in the sector. It was very hard, especially in the para-state electricity company, Eskom, and strongly fueled an ongoing debate on the nationalization of this enterprise.

Waves of strikes ...

The metal sector includes 10,500 companies and 300,000 workers: 200,000 of them were at different levels involved in strikes on a terrain that is all the more sensitive for the South African economy because Eskom has no longer been able, for just under 10 years, to meet the energy needs of individuals but also of businesses. Several large mines have had to stop production in recent years due to power cuts, something extremely rare in South Africa.

At the beginning of the strike, the demands put forward by NUMSA concerned mainly wage increases, 15 per cent at the opening of negotiations, 10 per cent at the finishing line, plus a housing allowance of 1,000 rand and the commitment by the employers not to have recourse to temporary work that is provided by labour brokers.

This issue was a very sensitive point of the strike. In the past, the adjustment of the labour force was done with the help of migrant workers from neighbouring countries, but especially from the Bantustans, these pseudo-republics recognized only by the apartheid regime, which made these workers foreigners in their own country. Today this is done by temp agencies, a recent practice in South Africa and a new factor in the division that exists within the confederation.

To calm things down and reduce anger levels, the question has just been the object of an amendment to the Labour Code. In fact, a statement written in a rather wooden jargon that does not convince all the COSATU federations, in particular NUMSA, which is at the head of the revolt against the influence of the leadership of the ANC on COSATU, and which sees in this amendment to the Labour Code only the recognition of temporary work as a factor in the adjustment of the labour force.

...and political repercussions

The period of negotiations was marked by the intensity of the two major conflicts that have marked the social movement this year: the mining conflict in the platinum sector and the metalworkers' strike. Two events that went beyond wage demands and the living conditions of workers. They confirmed and deepened the division within COSATU over links with the ANC, but also over the politicization of the trade-union debate.

A special conference was held in mid-August, which brought together leaders from 17 COSATU federations (out of 19) joined by the general secretary of the ANC, Gwede Mantashe, the deputy general secretary Jessie Duarte, the

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treasurer Zweli Mkhize and Ibrahim Patel. The subject of the meeting? The preparation of next year's COSATU congress, which is already looming as the congress of all the dangers.

The situation opened up by the election of April 2014 implies profound changes in political life. First of all, there has been a significant decline in the audience of the ANC and the strengthening of the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, which is imposing its presence in all the debates and which the ANC can no longer simply present as coming from the old (apartheid) regime. There has been the emergence of a new opposition party, EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters) led by Julius Malema, the former leader of the ANC youth wing who was expelled in 2012, which, having been in existence for less than a year, won 25 seats in parliament and is making life very hard for its former comrades. Finally, there has been the explosion of workers' struggles, the biggest that South Africa has seen in its entire existence, including during the apartheid period. The alliance of COSATU and the ANC was the motor force of the anti-apartheid struggle. After 20 years of what is called democracy, it is becoming the most visible expression of disillusionment.

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