

‘Workers are ready to fight’ – Govt warned to raise wage offer or face strike

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Getrude Makhafola Unions say government can't claim to be broke when it incurs billions in wasteful expenditure and gave MPs a 3% wage hike. Photo by Gallo Images/Darren Stewart Thousands of public service workers are ready to down tools across state departments, unless government comes up with a better offer when the parties return to negotiations at the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) on Thursday. Unions said workers were "fed up and tired" as they've had no salary increase for the past three years. "We are going back on Thursday to hear whether they will improve on the 2%. Government's engagement at the beginning was cordial and optimistic. They seemed like they were ready to hear us out. Until last week when they started somersaulting. Workers are ready to... Thousands of public service workers are ready to down tools across state departments, unless government comes up with a better offer when the parties return to negotiations at the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) on Thursday. Unions said workers were “fed up and tired” as they’ve had no salary increase for the past three years. “We are going back on Thursday to hear whether they will improve on the 2%. Government’s engagement at the beginning was cordial and optimistic. They seemed like they were ready to hear us out. Until last week when they started somersaulting. Workers are ready to fight for what is due to them. “If they have nothing to offer then it means negotiations will deadlock and go for

conciliation The lack of movement by the government will lead to a nationwide strike,” said convenor of Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu), Simon Hlungwani. Cosatu’s affiliates organising in the public sector such as the National Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru) and the Democratic Nursing Organisation of SA (Denosa), are the biggest public sector trade unions in the country. The parties met on Friday, when government tabled a revised offer of 2%, from an initial 1,5% plus R1 000 minimum cash equivalent for all employees across all employment levels. Unions demanded 10% at the start of the wage talks and have since reduced that to 6,5%. Workers’ demands ‘unaffordable’ Government has reiterated that the unions’ demand is unaffordable. With a wage bill of over R600 billion, the State is seeking avenues to cap the ballooning employee costs, and is being closely watched by rating agencies. At the start of the talks in May, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana indicated that he was taking an active role in the wage negotiations, a move criticised by the Public Servants Association (PSA). This is as government opted to not implement the above-CPI salary increases agreed upon for 2020/2021 – the final year of a three-year wage agreement. In his maiden budget speech in February, Godongwana remarked that the public service wage bill posed a high risk to the public purse, and that it was the single most expensive item in the country’s budget. An attempt by the unions to force government to comply and pay up was tossed out by the Constitutional Court in February. Hlungwani said a representative from national Treasury was part of the talks, along with others from other departments. The departments are all led by the Department of Public Service and Administration. He added that government can’t claim it has no money when it incurs billions of Rands in wasteful expenditure every year, while also allocating a 3% increase for ministers and other high-ranking officials. “None of the ministers earn less than a million per annum, but they cannot pay an overdue increase to a worker who earns less than R100,000 a year. You cannot say you don’t have money when you keep bailing out SOEs that’s collapsed and are on their knees. “If they have a problem they must come out and tell us... Among the many issues, we told them to clean up the Persal system [government payroll] and get rid of ghost employees so that no money is stolen through salaries, that’s their job.” Convenor of Cosatu, Simon Hlungwani Wage negotiations ‘demoralising’ Moses Mushi, spokesperson for the Department of Public Service and Administration, told The Citizen that government was committed to the wage negotiations and won’t comment on the ongoing processes in the bargaining council. He wouldn’t indicate whether the State had a plan to mitigate a possible public service strike. “Unions can have their opinions and indicate the direction they’re taking, but the bargaining council is still sitting. There’s no dispute lodged or granted, and as far as we

are concerned, negotiations are still continuing. “We would be putting the cart before the horse by talking about a strike. Negotiations are meant to find an amicable way to resolve differences,” Mushi said. Meanwhile, PSA spokesperson Reuben Maleka said his union will start balloting its members on Thursday on the strike. He added that the talks were “demoralising” after months of negotiations with government. “This all shows the government has no will to settle this, it’s not about money, they just do not care about public servants. “We’ll go there [at the PSCB] and listen to them, but we all know that this government waits for people to act before they listen, they won’t listen to anyone talking to them sitting on a chair. They won’t do anything unless you take action. “We are not going to wait for them, we’re going to move on and allow our members to vote and decide.” He said Godongwana shouldn’t be “hands-on” at the talks. “The Public Service Act is clear as to who is responsible for negotiations. As much as other departments such as health, defence, and education play a part, that doesn’t mean that Treasury should also be involved. That’s where the problem is. “Negotiations are specialised and are carried out by specialists such as those in the DPSA. Treasury’s job is to inform DPSA as to how much is in the kitty, and not be hands-on like they are doing.” The last public sector strike was in 2010. Government services, schools and hospitals were shut down, crippling public services for a month. Angered by government’s excessive expenditure on the 2010 Soccer World Cup, workers demanded 8,5% increase while government offered 7%, claiming there was no money to pay for the increments. The parties settled for 7.5%, bringing the destructive strike to an end. NOW READ: If unions want more money they must show what SA will get in return <div id="foot-video"...