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Unions Kick Off Protests Against GEMS Due to Increasing Medical Aid Costs

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Pretoria – A number of unions are expressing their anger regarding the rise in contributions for the Government Employees Medical Scheme (GEMS) and have announced plans for protests.

GEMS, the largest restricted membership medical scheme in South Africa with over 890,000 principal members and more than 2.4 million beneficiaries, has revealed contribution increases that are set to take effect in April.

The focal point of the discontent revolves around the contribution changes for 2026.

In response to this announcement, the affected unions have raised alarms that GEMS is becoming unaffordable, asserting that any moves to implement two separate contribution increases will meet with significant resistance.

In clarification on Saturday, 21 February 2026, GEMS stated, "We want to clarify that these are not two separate increases; rather, it is a single adjustment of 9.5% that took effect on 1 February 2026."

GEMS further elaborated, "The 9.8% figure mentioned was already approved for January by the Regulator as part of statutory timelines, and the change effective from 1 April 2026 relates solely to the employer subsidy, which is managed by the employer and not an additional GEMS contribution increase."

However, unions are organizing against the proposed contribution rises for 2026, contending that the escalating medical aid expenses will disproportionately affect members and hinder their access to healthcare services.

The Public Servants Association (PSA) has given GEMS a seven-day ultimatum to withdraw the recent 9.8% contribution hike for 2026.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA) is urging members to participate in lunch-hour demonstrations opposing the steep rise in GEMS premiums.

COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, has expressed support for PSA, DENOSA, and other unions in their efforts against the GEMS contribution increases.

In response to the unions' stance, GEMS recognized that protests embody organized labor's right to express concerns, particularly regarding the contribution hikes for 2026.

GEMS reiterated that the announced increases are crucial for ensuring the scheme's financial sustainability "for the benefit of its members."

In Durban, PSA members held pickets today, Saturday, 21 February 2026, to demonstrate against the contribution hikes.

GEMS noted that its executive management and senior officials were "present to receive the memorandum and reaffirm our commitment" to structured discussions in all regions.

“As a scheme, we encourage ongoing engagement and consultation with organized labor to find and implement solutions,” stated Dr. Stan Moloabi, Principal Officer of GEMS.

“We are open and fully committed to constructive dialogue, pledging to share information transparently so we can work together towards practical and sustainable solutions.”

“We genuinely believe that meaningful engagement is the most effective way to address concerns and build trust.”

Dr. Moloabi continued, “We assert that GEMS is committed to transparency, affordability, and the long-term viability of the scheme for the benefit of all members.”

“We value our ongoing partnership with stakeholders and will continue to engage in good faith, ensuring our decisions are responsible, balanced, and in the best interests of our members.”

The post Medical Aid Contribution Hikes: Unions Begin Protests Against GEMS appeared first on The Bulrushes.

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