

Web Exclusive: Cosatu speaks out against work on public holidays

By Wiseman Khuzwayo

Employers are succeeding in getting an increasing number of workers to report for duty on public holidays, despite a campaign against this by Cosatu.

This is according to a report by Cosatu's secretariat which was tabled at the labour federation's 10th triannual national congress on Tuesday.

It says the ninth national congress in 2006 decided that Cosatu should campaign for an amendment to the Public Holidays Act to ban trading on election days and six other public holidays.

The report openly acknowledges that while Cosatu had campaigned for this to happen, "our campaign is largely limited to press statements ... SACCAWU (the SA Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union) fought hard to force a deal on some of the retailers, without much success. Slowly, the employers are rolling back the 12 public holidays. They are managing to make more workers work instead of honouring the history of our struggles. Unless we campaign more strongly, we may create a new army of the "new worker" who are made up of mainly young and casualised workers with no connection to our history of militant traditions."

It adds: "In a period of such high levels of unemployment, low pay and where growing numbers of workers are employed by labour brokers, the bosses have all the cards. They use these conditions to force workers or entice them through overtime to work on these days. We have tried to lobby the government to amend and ban trading on elections day."

The report says that it was important to note that significant strikes in recent years had involved casualised, more vulnerable workers (such as retail, security and cleaning) and "newly organised" workers (such as public sector workers, cabin attendants and doctors.)

It says that affiliates were beginning to establish strike funds, although mostly they were for strike-related activities such as transport, arrests and food on the picket line. Most of them were not able to compensate for lost wages.

"There were different views expressed on whether unions should so, however. Some argued that this would be the only way that they would get their members out on strike (for example some public sector workers). Others argued, however, that the very basis of a strike is that workers withdraw their labour power and sacrifice wages in order to win their demands, and that this sacrifice is a significant factor in demonstrating workers' commitment and determination," states the report.

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