

Cosatu spoils for fight over brokers

By Wiseman Khuzwayo

Cosatu and its affiliated unions will be embarking on a one-day mass action on October 7 to press home their demands for the banning of labour brokers by the government.

This was in line with the call by the International Trade Union Confederation and global union federations for an international day of action against precarious work, the labour federation said.

This was contained in the final declaration of its four-day 10th national congress, which ended on Thursday.

The announcement of the mass action was made at a press conference which also introduced re-elected Cosatu office bearers and new ones. The new ones are Freda Oosthuizen, the treasurer, and James Tjotjo and Zingiswa Losi, first and second deputy president, respectively.

Zwelinzima Vavi, the general secretary, said the trade union movement would take the mass action through pickets to the doors of employers who used labour brokers.

He denied that labour brokers were the same as recruitment agencies.

"We use agencies ourselves where we don't have the skills," said Vavi.

"Labour brokers take a lion's share of the worker's wages. They take 20 percent. Seasonal and temporary work will always be there. Employers have been using this argument that Cosatu wants to ban the use of seasonal and temporary workers to confuse this argument," he added.

Vavi said Cosatu was not against the suggestion by the ANC that the portfolio committee on labour should hold public hearings in the provinces on the matter.

"We want a ban but we will engage. We suggested it to Parliament."

He said three years ago, 60 percent of workers in the retail industry were casuals.

"Our concern is that if we don't put our foot down on this, we may end up with all the workers in retail being casual," said Vavi.

He said labour brokers and Cosatu's campaign for decent work simply did not mix.

Bheki Ntshalintshali, the deputy general secretary, said that the problem with labour broking was that it had no definition of a workplace.

"We believe that the (labour) minister (Membathisi Mdladlana) was right when he said we must ban these labour brokers. We will engage in all the processes but our call has not changed," he said.

The committee held public hearings on labour brokers for two days last month. Taking part were stakeholders.

After the hearings, the committee said that it had identified two arguments that were put forward to deal with some of the problems with labour broking.

One was that further regulation was needed in the industry and the other was that labour brokers needed to be banned.

The committee proposed to embark on nationwide public hearings to get more views on the issue, especially those of ordinary citizens who were affected by the practice.

Last month, Mdladlana said that the exploitation of workers by labour brokers might soon be a thing of the past because plans were afoot to review the law that regulated labour brokers.

This came out of research commissioned by the department that indicated that employees engaged through brokers were, among others, paid significantly less than those who were directly hired by employers though they performed the same work.

Reacting to the findings of the research, Mdladlana described labour broking as "a form of human trafficking", saying the practice was selling the labour of workers to the highest bidder.

"It is an extreme form of free market capitalism which reduces workers to commodities that can be traded for profit as if they were meat or vegetables. The agenda of labour brokers is pro-employer and anti-trade unionism. Labour brokers are anti-trade union because they constantly move workers around from one place to another often with no access to union officials, with no possibility of stop order deduction for union subscriptions," said Mdladlana.

He said the review was aimed at ensuring that employees hired through labour brokers enjoyed the same rights and protection as any other workers.

In a debate on labour brokers at the national congress, Vuyo Bikitsha, a delegate from the National Union of Metalworkers of SA, said: "We support Saccawu (the SA Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union) that labour brokers must be banned, finish and klaar.

"We want the laws of this country to completely ban this modern slavery. Why the primary employer uses labour brokers is to run away from the cost benefits and to underpay the worker."

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