

# Unions dominate first day of hearings on labour brokers

2009-08-25 *Portfolio Committee on Labour*

Despite complaints from opposition members of insufficient time, many parties who had not applied to Parliament in terms of the government notice for a say on the issue of labour brokers were allowed to address a public hearings meeting of the labour portfolio committee, most of the unscheduled speakers being union members who had gathered in the public seating area. All called for an immediate banning of all labour broking in South Africa.

Over two days, some forty oral submissions have been scheduled but by lunchtime on the first day, only three had been presented due to public questioning of the scheduled speakers. Chairperson of the portfolio committee, LE Yengeni, said if the meeting were to be “public”, then this must be allowed.

A group called Consulting Engineers and Project Managers argued that many mining projects, such as once-off mining development projects, could not be undertaken on any other basis than with short term professional miners who were booked through international labour brokers drawing on a global labour market on such technical matters as shaft sinking.

Labour broking was an essential part of the mining industry, the group said, and calls made for labour in certain areas under certain conditions was very specific in their industry.

Counter-argument was presented by the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) who said that municipalities often allowed “labour brokers to stand at the gate to offer casual rates at half the regular rate to keep municipal service costs down”.

This and other similar practices by municipalities around the country and by local governments had to be stopped by banning labour brokers. The spokesman said that labour brokers “were not just a political issue but a main cause of socio-economic decline in South Africa. No amount of regulation could catch these people”, he said.

Ian Ollis, spokesperson for the DA on labour, said in his view SAMWU were trying to “unionise the temporary and casual labour market” and asked what would happen to the millions of people who worked through labour brokers if this kind of employment just disappeared.”

“Thousands of people prefer to work this way”, he said, “and either for reasons that suits them personally or is embodied in the nature of their professions and industries. This use of specialised labour broking is now the preferred option in many countries and the practice is growing”.

What was bad about labour broking could be controlled by regulation, he said, and called upon Parliament to obtain correct data from industry and commerce before listening to trade union calls for outright banning.

Also addressing parliamentarians on the first day are the Metal and Electricity Workers Union of South Africa, the Confederation of South African Workers, Agric Western Cape, Solidarity and Business Leadership South Africa.

On the second day COSATU and four of its affiliates are scheduled to address the labour portfolio committee, plus presentations from BUSA, the ANC Youth League and the Young Communist League of South Africa.

Some six labour brokers are due to speak throughout the two-day hearings, two of these receiving some tough questioning from parliamentarians in the first day.

MPs of the portfolio committee on labour were addressed the previous week by the Centre for Rural Legal Studies who detailed cases of worker abuse in the farming areas of the Western Cape, many farms in the fruit industry using seasonal casual labour.

Chairperson Yengeni concluded that particular meeting by saying that as a result of the forthcoming hearings, the committee had to choose between banning labour brokers or re-defining the relationship between employer and worker. Many labour brokers, she said, were guilty of bad practices.

Preceding the two days of hearings, over thirty-five separate written presentations on the subject of labour broking and whether to ban it or re-regulate it, have been submitted to Parliament indicating intense interest in the subject matter across a broad range of sectors and labour groupings.

Over R24m is reportedly paid to SETAS by labour brokers.