

Statement (NUMSA): South African union demands action on Covid-19

Friday 27 March 2020, by [CHIRWA Andrew](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2020).

Andrew Chirwa is the president of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). This statement was issued today as Covid-19 infections in South Africa continued to rise and raises criticisms of President Cyril Ramaphosa of the African National Congress. NUMSA's workers were in the front line of the fight to overturn apartheid and is today one of the nation's most influential unions.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) is disappointed that to date our government has not proposed enough measures to cushion the working class and the poor against the negative effects of the coronavirus outbreak. Government has declared the virus outbreak a national disaster, and some steps have been taken to reduce infection, but this does not go far enough.

Our government is only for the benefit of the elite, this is demonstrated by its reluctance to act swiftly to protect the working class and the poor against the ravages of this virus. Not enough concrete measures have been announced to cushion the working class and the poor from the financial impact of the virus. For example, a debt relief fund for SMME's and Micro enterprises has been proposed by the Department of Small Business Development to protect small business owners, amid interruptions in productivity and loss of income, but there has been no mention of debt relief for individuals and families' especially as most of them will have their income streams interrupted. Italy is currently at the epicenter of the disease and its government has placed a suspension on monthly home loan repayments, and banks are offering workers' and their families' debt repayment holidays.

The South African Reserve Bank announced only a 1% reduction in interest rates, but this is not good enough. NUMSA re-iterates the demand for the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) to scrap inflation targeting. The U.S. Federal Reserve has reduced interest rates to 0,25% and they are working on a stimulus package which will include compensating all workers with cash. At the beginning of the month the Federal Reserve reduced interest rates to half a percentage point as an emergency measure to stimulate the economy in the wake of the epidemic. As usual the SARB is out of touch with reality and with the needs of our society and it is doing its utmost best to protect the value of white wealth, instead of responding to the needs of our society. This is why we have always called for it to be nationalized because it does not serve our national interests.

NUMSA has also consistently called for our hospitals to be nationalized, and for private healthcare to be abolished in its entirety. The government of Spain has nationalized all private hospitals in response to the coronavirus in order to guarantee quality healthcare for all who are affected. Our

government is silent on this question. The department of Economic Development said in its statement that it has published regulations that will allow “healthcare providers to coordinate their actions as part of Department of Health efforts, including the sharing of facilities and beds, medical supplies nurses and doctors between different companies and with government”.

It is unclear if these services will be free to the public, and that is deeply concerning for us because the majority of the population is not on medical aid, and they will not be able to afford these services. And one has to wonder how this cooperation will work in a practical sense because the standard of private healthcare compared to the standards in the public sector are vastly different. Our state hospitals are collapsing and they are drastically under resourced in terms of basic medication, sanitizing equipment and staff.

Companies are planning to shut down for several weeks, or possibly even months’ and some are advising workers to use their leave days, or they are simply laying off workers. the Department of Labour said this week that the short term UIF benefit would kick in for companies in financial distress. Workers who need special leave because they have been quarantined for two weeks will be fully paid, but if it is for longer, then UIF benefits will kick in. We are concerned because we know of many instances where companies deduct UIF from employees, but they fail to pay contributions over to the fund. This will leave many workers in the lurch and without any alternatives to support themselves and their families’ when the UIF benefit runs out.

NUMSA is demanding that this government must immediately implement measures which will cushion against the negative social impact which the virus will have. These measures must include:

1. Private hospitals must be nationalized and open to all
2. Testing and treatment for coronavirus must be free
3. Cut interest rates down to zero for the duration of the epidemic and create stimulus packages for the economy
4. A basic income grant must be made available for the poor
5. Guaranteed paid leave for all workers who have been placed on quarantine, or short-time/layoff because of the temporary shutdown of plants.
6. All home loan and rent payments including all debt repayments must be suspended until after the epidemic has been dealt with
7. Food parcels must be provided for all those on self-isolation or quarantine in our townships and informal settlements
8. It must be mandatory for all companies to adhere to the World Health Organization standards of cleanliness in the workplace. Workers who are forced to work and who are exposed to the public, eg. garage workers, cashiers, waiters etc, all workers in the service industry must be provided with safety masks, sanitizers and gloves while on duty by the employer. This must be enforced with severe penalties for those who fail to adhere.

Today on Human Rights Day we honour the memory of the brave men and women of Sharpeville who were killed for protesting against the cruel and unjust ‘Dompas’ system in the Sharpeville Massacre. This system was similar to the one implemented by the German Nazi government which forced German Jews to carry documentation identifying themselves. The residents of Sharpeville were shot by Apartheid police for fighting for a better life for themselves and their families. They believed that

the end of the brutal racist Apartheid system would mean that the African working class majority would live a better life. This meant access to quality education, healthcare and housing for the working class majority.

Unfortunately, Capitalism has entrenched inequality and over the last 26 years it has demonstrated an inability to respond to the needs of our society as whole. Access to quality healthcare is a human right. If we fail to implement these emergency measures we will never recover from the devastating impact of the virus. Our economic growth prospects will be much worse than what they are now, and poverty and inequality will worsen. But worse than that, we risk losing many more lives, not just because of the virus, but also because of poverty and hunger. It is time to put the well-being of society ahead of rampant profiteering.

Aluta continua!

The struggle continues!

Andrew Chirwa

P.S.

• NO BORDERS ON MARCH 21, 2020:

<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/03/21/andrew-chirwa-south-african-union-demands-action-on-covid-19/>