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A Week into the Public Sector Strike: TAC and SECTION27 Statement

By *moderator*
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We Demand Political Leadership & Engagement from the Highest Level of Government - Meet Union Demands for Decent Salaries and Conditions!

A week into the public sector strike the Treatment Action Campaign and SECTION27 regret that no agreement has been reached between striking public service workers and the government. We support the demands of workers and their right to strike. But we regret the growing polarisation, pain and loss of life. This is now a political crisis that requires political leadership and a solution.

In this statement we set out what we believe should guide government and the unions in finding a solution.

The right to health care depends on properly paid health workers!

Section 27 of the Constitution sets out the right of everyone to have access to health care services. It creates a legal duty that binds the government to progressively realise the right of access to health care services within its ?available resources?. A key component of the delivery of health care services is an efficient, properly staffed and motivated public service. Employees working in conditions where they are underpaid and forced to endure undignified conditions of service cannot meet this standard.

We do not understand why some of our society?s most essential workers are the lowest paid.

We do understand the anger of workers at the growing inequality in our country fed by the conspicuous consumption of those who occupy high governmental office.

Playing brinkmanship with the unions and attempting to defeat the strike is wrong. If government does defeat the strike it will not have won. Essential workers will return to work further alienated, demoralised, demotivated and angry. Delivery of health care services will suffer.

Reach a Minimum Service Level Agreement with Unions

We understand the worker?s anger and frustration. But TAC and SECTION27 are concerned that striking workers have engaged in intimidation and violence against non-striking workers and endangered the lives of patients. It is vital that the workers hold the moral high ground in this strike. It is vital that the union members act constitutionally ? even when government is not.

We commend the spirit of ubuntu and volunteerism that has motivated many people to volunteer in public hospitals to attempt to fill the gap in service delivery in the past week. But we note that this has been made necessary only because government has failed to negotiate minimum service level agreements with public sector workers.

We are worried about the consequences for health of the lack of delivery resulting from the absence of health workers. We appeal to COSATU and all unions to immediately announce that they will support efforts to ensure that people

requiring chronic medicines, including ARVs and TB drugs, are able to receive these medicines.

As we have said before, it is vital that minimum service level agreements are finalised with unions so that public sector workers can exercise their constitutional right to strike whilst at the same time preventing avoidable loss of life.

Political Leadership after the Strike

We believe that the actions of Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, in volunteering himself to provide health services are motivated by a genuine desire to save lives. However, when the strike is over his visible leadership and determination must carry through to the urgent measures that are needed to stabilise our health system, including:

? Re-deploying bureaucrats from over staffed offices of the national and provincial health departments into health care facilities.

? Holding hospital CEOs strictly to account for performance.

? Identifying and punishing the rank corruption in the health system.

? Urgently finalising a rural health strategy.

? Urgently finalising a reasonable human resource for health plan and negotiating within Cabinet to ensure that there are sufficient resources available to implement it.

Ensuring Available Resources for Health

The government continues to claim that the demands of workers are unaffordable. But it has failed to supply evidence. They have not offered a thorough analysis of the fiscal situation to substantiate their claim. The Constitution demands more of them.

The National Treasury?s disengagement is also to be regretted. We call on the Treasury to provide an account of the available resources for the public service as well as a plan to indicate how public servants will be properly paid in years ahead.

Without a properly funded plan for health and education we will not achieve the rights promised by our Constitution.

This statement is also endorsed by the Rural Health Advocacy Project

For further comment contact:

Nonkosi Khumalo: TAC Chairperson 074 1945 911
Vuyiseka Dubula: TAC General Secretary 082 7633 005

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