

SAMWU trashes cities as strike end looms

Written by Sapa
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Streets littered with refuse and looted stalls belonging to hawkers were left in the wake of SA Municipal Workers' Union protest marches on Thursday.

Samwu announced it was close to ending its four-day-old strike late on Thursday, after its members brought central Durban to a standstill and left the Johannesburg CBD central littered with refuse. "We are almost on the verge [of ending this strike]. We have been able to find each other on contentious issues," Samwu Gauteng secretary Vincent Vena told a media briefing in Johannesburg.

In Durban protesters carrying animal skulls and waving sticks danced through Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street (West Street) while singing "ubaba uyajabula mangishayi bhunu" (my father is happy when I hit the boer) and the now-banned "dubula ibhunu" (shoot the boer).

Municipal workers gathered to hand over memoranda of demands to government representatives in the various cities in a bid to pressure their employer, the SA Local Government Association (Salga) to accede to Samwu's demands. Samwu began its strike demanding market-related salaries for lower and middle income employees on Monday. It wanted this to apply to higher ranking officials' salaries too as Samwu charged they were overpaid and awarding themselves perks. Thousands of workers participated in the Johannesburg protest, with the march culminating in Ignatius Jacobs, a senior official from the office of the Gauteng premier, receiving the union's memorandum.

Johannesburg Samwu spokesman Dumisani Langa said the union was happy with the march, but was disappointed about the littering of the streets. "Trashing has no place in a strike," he said, explaining that it happened because workers from across the province arrived before the union's leadership.

In Durban about 100 workers emptied dustbins, also leaving streets covered in refuse, and destroyed stalls belonging to hawkers. Police used water cannons to disperse them. Shops in both Johannesburg and Durban were closed as their owners feared being looted and streets were largely closed to traffic. In Port Elizabeth about 50 Samwu workers disrupted traffic and tried to prevent municipal employees from going to work around 8am. Police spokesman Captain Johann Rheeder said the group was warned several times to picket on the pavement and not interrupt traffic flow, but they ignored this. Police then used stun guns to remove them.

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It was quiet by midday, he said.

Progress was made during talks between Samwu and the SA Local Government Association (Salga) on Wednesday, but both parties were tight-lipped on the details, saying they had to discuss the matter with their members first. "The union is happy that Salga came to the negotiating table sober-minded this time around," said Samwu national spokesman Tahir Sema. He said Salga had put a proposal on the table, but declined to furnish details. Talks would resume on Friday at 2pm. The strike would continue in the meantime.

The Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union on Thursday raised concern about the impact of the strike on the Fifa World Cup. Although it had members in the same sector with similar concerns to Samwu, the union had opted not to strike. The union said it had approached Salga's bargaining council requesting an urgent meeting with Salga and Samwu to end the impasse.