Tensions run high as Zuma’s backers stage fightback bid

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PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma’s backers and those supporting Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan were embroiled in a heated exchange at the ANC’s national working committee meeting this week as the fallout from the fraud charges brought against Gordhan spit over into party structures.

The Sunday Times can reveal that Zuma’s supporters launched a fightback campaign at the meeting on Monday, calling for ANC chief whip Jackson Mthembu’s head, and for disciplinary proceedings against Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa and cabinet ministers who have openly defended Gordhan.

The attack on Gordhan’s sympathisers was led by ANC Youth League president Collen Maine, who told the gathering at Luthuli House that Mthembu must be removed from his job as the party's parliamentary boss.

Maine also demanded that the ANC discipline Ramaphosa and ministers Aaron Motsoaledi, Derek Hanekom and Thulas Nxesi, and deputy minister Joe Phaahla.

The meeting turned sour and Mthembu described Maine’s utterances as “insults”.

Maine, who has emerged as the mouthpiece of the so-called “premier league” lobby group, confirmed that he led the attack against Gordhan and his defenders. He said Gordhan’s supporters “defined themselves outside of the ANC”. It is believed that Maine’s views are shared by Zuma’s backers.

In an interview on Friday, Maine said: “Gordhan and his crew have arrogated to themselves the status of self-importance, including Jackson Mthembu. The thing is, Mthembu does not appreciate the damage he is doing to the ANC because he is the chief whip of the ANC.”

He said Mthembu must realise that his personal views were interpreted as the views of the ANC caucus.

“If I was the ANC, I would remove him,” Maine said.

Mthembu responded by labelling his attacker “an uncouth young man who does not know what he is talking about”.

Maine also lashed out at ANC leaders who were “popcorning” (grandstanding) by raising ANC matters publicly.

“If you define yourself outside the structures of the ANC and decisions of the ANC, you must be charged for bringing the party into disrepute,” Maine said.

Mthembu said the youth league leader should “go jump into the nearest hell”. And: “I will say so in the next meeting of the national executive committee because it’s the NEC that appointed Mthembu as the chief whip.”

“I also put it to the NWC that, by the way, I don’t need your permission to support Pravin. “When we fought [for] the then deputy president of the ANC … we did not need permission,” said Mthembu, in reference to the support ANC leaders gave Zuma when he faced fraud and corruption charges in 2006.

“Until when must we keep quiet on these issues because we have some loudmouth youth league president who says what he wants, and anywhere, who insults members of the NEC and calls them snakes and nothing happens to him?”

“He says in the NWC meeting that the ministers who spoke for Pravin must be purged. Nobody says anything, they just look at him.

“So there are factions in the ANC that can speak as they like and nothing happens; when some of us speak on principle, then we must be purged. We were insulted in the NWC.”

Mthembu said the ANC risked losing power if it continued to deviate from its principles and values.

“The ANC should wake up and smell the coffee; we can’t continue to be led by the uncouth young people. Come 2019, we will be out of power if this is what we continue to do. We will not regain the confidence of our people,” he said.

ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe told the Sunday Times that it was not correct that those who publicly call for the disciplining of ANC leaders were not disciplined themselves.

And in response to calls by the youth league for discipline, Motsoaledi said he did not account to the party’s youth wing.

“I will be happy if the youth league is dealing with issues of young people rather than chasing the minister of finance around,” he said. “Every time they [the Youth League] opens their mouth they are chasing the minister of finance.”

The political council of the tripartite alliance is meeting today to discuss the turmoil.

Both the SAPC and Cosatu have questioned the political motive for charging Gordhan.