

Contract workers strike in the municipality

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MBOMBELA - A group of frustrated contract workers for the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) within the City of Mbombela Local Municipality (CMLM), trashed the CBD over the impending completion of their contracts on Wednesday.

Members of the public were upset by the mess throughout the inner city, from Mbombela Civic Centre, where the protesters originally gathered, to Henshall Street in the CBD. Several photos were published on various social-media groups of overturned rubbish bins and torn-apart refuse bags, which left the roads and sidewalks strewn with broken glass, polystyrene takeaway boxes, and food waste.

Seven days after handing a memorandum outlining their concerns over to the municipality, protesters were not happy with the response from executive mayor, Cllr Sibusiso Mathonsi, yesterday. There were cries of "No job, no vote!" and "They are using our salary to pay the Eskom account!"

Why the workers were protesting

According to the written memorandum, some EPWP workers are unhappy that their 12-month contracts are not being extended, and they wish to be permanently employed "by the premier".

Ms Sharmaine Laya, who believes this is a political problem, said the EPWP workers are being "thrown away like scavenging dogs".

"When the ANC needs our votes, they come to our doors with food parcels and beg us to vote. The people within the ANC are corrupt. They want to give our jobs to their friends and brothers and cousins," Laya said.

Another protester said she works from 07:30 to 16:00 for R1 980 per month.

"We are tired of the empty promises. What



Protesters tear open refuse bags on their way out of the municipal office grounds.

type of a mayor is he? Next time, we will vote for change! We expect the premier to address us now."

It is unclear to *Lowvelder* at this stage how many hours the contractors work each day, but their memorandum states that they wish to receive a minimum wage of R3 500 a month, as per deputy president, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa's minimum-wage proposal last year.

The municipality's response

The CMLM responded to the protest emphasising that the EPWP is a national programme and has nothing to do with a particular political party.

According to spokesman, Mr Joseph Ngala, "This is a government programme (run by the national Department of Public Works) and the municipality is speaking on behalf of government."

He added that the contracts clearly stipulate a working period of 12 months and the municipality would like to see the programme continue, as it was beneficial for job creation in the area.

"If the funds are allocated from national

level, we will continue with the EPWP but we will have to follow due processes and policy on recruitment and selection of contract workers," he said.

Over 500 EPWP workers are employed in the City of Mbombela, Ngala said. He also stressed that the actions of the protesters were uncalled for. "The people were given a platform to raise their concerns and express their views. Because they were not satisfied, they made a huge mess, which someone else will now have to clean up," he said.

The EFF and DA react to the protest

Mr Steve Schormann, DA leader in the municipality, said the EPWP was a stopgap measure for employment creation.

"It was never supposed to be a long-term employment mechanism. We see it, however, as the first stepping stone to employment at the council and recommend the government sees it as such too. There has to be career-development planning in place for these workers," Schormann said.

He added that he thinks the issue is, in fact, financial and reiterated that the EPWP is funded by national government.

"Some programmes like this will have to be cut. There is just not enough cash!" he told *Lowvelder*.

The EFF's provincial leader, Mr Collen Sedibe, said although the EFF was invited to the protest yesterday, the party could not get directly involved without first studying the EPWP contracts.

"We do not know who is in the right and who is in the wrong at this stage. We are willing to fight with them to see there is fairness in every employment," Sedibe told *Lowvelder*.

He added that he knows the EPWP contract workers were deployed during the election to remove opposition party posters, among other things.

"Immediately after the elections, they are being dumped. If there is unfairness, we will take up their cause," he said.

NCID and volunteers clean up the mess

Workers from the Nelspruit City Improvement District (NCID) were deployed to clean up the mess the protesters left behind. A businesswoman who works in the CBD phoned the paper to express her gratitude to the workers.

The NCID was established in 2004, and is funded by property owners to provide "top-up" urban management services to the CBD area specifically. Manager, Mr TJ Maré, said he was most pleased to hear such positive feedback.

"We are proud to be associated with the property owners and we strive to do a better job every day to counteract the decay in services which should be rendered," he said.

Many volunteers including policemen and community organisation representatives, also helped to clear the streets earlier in the day.



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