

Rubbish piles up in Durban suburbs

Striking staff issued with ultimatum

BHEKI MBANJWA |
bheki.mbanjwa@inl.co.za

RUBBISH piled up on the streets of Durban's CBD and some suburbs as refuse collection came to a standstill yesterday due to a strike by employees of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

About 800 EPWP workers attached to Durban Solid Waste (DSW) downed tools and locked some of the gates to the depots, preventing trucks from leaving their work stations.

Areas affected include Durban Central, Newlands, Jacobs, Bluff, Chatsworth and Lower Glenwood.

A clean-up operation was expected to start yesterday afternoon and continue throughout the night after the city announced that the situation had returned to normal.

However, The Mercury understands from sources that management had given workers an ultimatum to return to work this morning or be fired.

Phumlani Memela, a representative of the workers, said they had received "a threat" via WhatsApp.

"The workers said if that is the way that the management want to engage with us, let it be. If they want to fire us, let it be."

Memela said the workers would continue with the strike until their demands were met. A meeting between the workers' representatives and city officials was scheduled for 9am today at Springfield.

A source close to the meeting said the workers were told there was no budget to give them permanent employment.

There are 1 200 EPWP workers who form part of a larger pool of more than 13 000 working in various departments in the municipality.

There were also allegations that the striking workers had threatened staff from DSW, while others claimed DSW staff had downed tools in solidarity.

City spokesperson Musawakhe Mayisela apologised to residents yesterday, promising that the city would act where there was evidence of disregard for the law.

"Following engagements between the city and the workers, the situation

has returned to normal. The city is working unceasingly to eradicate the backlog of refuse removal in affected areas," Mayisela said.

The striking workers are demanding to be absorbed into the municipality's pool of permanent employees.

The recent strike was the second this year, after another in January.

Raymond Rampersad, head of DSW, said that in June, 172 EPWP workers had been absorbed by the unit. He said these were workers who had been with the project since 2014, adding that preference had been given to those who had come first as they had over the years received full training.

He said his management was constantly engaging and advising the EPWP workers on vacancies available.

"It is puzzling why they are doing what they are doing now," he said.

Speaking to The Mercury, striking workers claimed they had been promised permanent jobs, but the city's leadership had reneged on this.

"What has happened is that they have made matters worse by shortening the contracts. In the past, workers would get two- or three-year contracts but recently they are made to sign month-to-month contracts," said one of the workers, who did not want to be identified.

The workers were hoping that being employed would mean better salaries. "We earn R2 500 a month and work from Monday to Friday, from 7am to 4pm," one said.

Mayisela said the EPWP projects employ workers on a temporary basis. "It is not a permanent job and there is no policy that says it must be permanent. However, we do encourage those on the EPWP programme to apply for positions advertised by the public and private sectors."

The workers have also written to the regional and provincial leadership structure of the ANC, asking for the party to intervene.

The city's EPWP has been plagued by controversies over recent months. One of these was the revelation that some officials had registered ghost employees on the programme and pocketed "salaries" worth R1.2 million in just one month.