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SAMWU

## Municipalities are exploiting the poor

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THE South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) has accused municipalities of exploiting poor people who are employed through the government's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

The government came up with EPWP as "key programmes aimed at providing poverty and income relief through temporary work for the unemployed."

The government's South African Cities Network released a report in 2018, saying the programme, which then president Thabo Mbeki's administration introduced in 2003, created 9.4 million job opportunities since 2004. It was being used by almost all spheres of government, including state-owned enterprises.

According to the programme, besides providing much-needed income, it was designed to provide skills training to the beneficiaries, who are young people and women from poverty-stricken households.

However, according to Samwu deputy general secretary Nkhetheni Muthavhi, the EPWP had been of almost no benefit except paying small salaries. He said some municipalities would replace their permanent general workers who have resigned or gone to pension with EPWPs and pay them salaries that were far less than what was paid to permanent employees.

"We are saying the work that they are doing is not a project that comes to an end. It is the work that continues, and therefore, these people (EPWPs) must not be exploited.

"They should be employed in that space permanently. If I was working in that position permanently, why should I be replaced by a temporary worker who is paid less than what I was earning, even by 70%," said Muthavhi.

According to the union, at the two-day EPWP Phase 5 Indaba held in Pretoria from October 10, Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Sihle Zikalala announced that the government would implement a "major shake-up" in the EPWP. The union wanted the shake-up to include employing them permanently and ending all forms of exploitation.

He said the majority of the municipality's more than half of

the workforce were EPWPs who are doing the same job as their permanent colleagues.

"Others have been working there for more than two years with no benefit at all," he said.

Samwu said if they were not employed permanently, EPWPs should be afforded skills training, so that they can be employable anywhere in future.

"Instead of doing that (providing them with experience and skills), there are political parties who would take them on door-to-door election campaigns. Because there are no specific laws that govern EPWPs, you may arrive at work in the morning only to be told that you are no longer employed.

"At the end of their contract, they don't leave with any benefit, not even a certificate that shows that you have an experience in a certain field, which is why we are saying the EPWP, in its current form, is not what the Labour Relations Act has envisaged," Muthavhi said.

He said the programme was being used to benefit politicians of various parties who hold powers in various municipalities.

Most of the EPWP participants would be employed for up to 12 months and, thereafter, be removed to give others a chance to also earn a salary. He said the rights of the EPWP employees were violated as municipalities did not allow them to join unions.

"The reality is that these are people who are exploited, who are doing what they are not employed to do, these are people who are hired as EPWPs but end up doing something else.

"They cannot at all say no when they are told to go and campaign for political parties.

"They are doing anything and everything they are asked to do," he said.

However, Muthavhi could not specify a political party that is notorious for abusing EPWPs, as most political parties who are ruling municipalities "have been doing this for a long time, and we know them for exploiting poor workers."

"We are the only union that is raising this matter, but I also know that there is a union that is being formed that would deal specifically with EPWPs, and I think it is registered," he said.