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EMPLOYMENT

Ex-EPWP workers camp outside Durban City Hall

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DESPERATE former workers of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) camped out at the Durban City Hall for four nights, protesting against the stalling of their rehiring process.

Their contracts were terminated in July due to a lack of funding from the Department of Public Works, which oversees the programme.

With the prospects of employment fading, the group braved the chilly Durban nights in hopes of drawing attention to their plight.

The protesters, many of whom have been working under 12-month contracts for almost a decade, started their vigils on Tuesday and continued until Saturday.

Silindile Mashobane, one of the protesters, shared her ordeal. "I left my family for five days and slept outside City Hall to show the city officials that we desperately need these jobs. Many of our colleagues have been evicted by their landlords because they could no longer afford to pay rent," she said.

The EPWP was aimed at providing temporary jobs, a critical initiative amid

increasing unemployment rates in South Africa and, by extension, its provinces, including KwaZulu-Natal.

Thandi Ngcogo, another protester, voiced her frustration with the eThekweni municipality, led by a coalition government of the ANC and smaller parties. "What they did to us is unfair labour practices. We will continue to protest until the city rehires us as EPWP workers," she asserted, highlighting the emotional toll the contract termination has taken on her life.

The municipality has repeatedly said that the termination of the programme owed to the budget cut by the Public Works by R42 million to R18m for the 2024/25 financial year.

This dramatic reduction threatens to slash the number of programme participants from 4000 to just 1276.

eThekweni Mayor Cyril Xaba, who had earlier promised to revive the programme and address the city's unemployment crisis, now faces public scrutiny amid the uncertainty of the future of the EPWP.

"After the Department of Public Works reduced the budget to R18 million, the City reprioritised funding to top up this amount," said Xaba.

His reassurance that there would still be job opportunities has not quelled the protests, as many feel abandoned and betrayed by the promises made.

Since it was launched in 2004 during Thabo Mbeki's presidency, the programme has faced numerous challenges, including allegations of nepotism and mismanagement by local officials.

The Municipal and Allied Trade Union of South Africa (Matusa) has expressed growing frustration, accusing the municipality of exploiting EPWP workers.

Regional secretary Thokozani Maxego insisted, "These workers have been exploited for years. When we piled pressure on the municipality to hire the workers, the officials, instead chose to terminate their contracts."

Matusa has escalated the matter to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), alleging unfair dismissal.

Maxego confirmed that the mayor had promised action during their meeting after he took the reins as eThekweni mayor in June. However, this has not yielded any results, said Maxego.

"We will continue to pile the pressure for these people to be rehired in

the municipality, some of whom have worked here for 10 years, and this time permanently," he added.

The municipality has found itself under increasing pressure from unions, especially those who have staged marches at the city hall to voice their dissatisfaction following the programme's abrupt termination in July due to funding shortages.

eThekweni Municipality spokesperson Gugu Sisilana said, "During a media briefing last month, Mayor Cyril Xaba reaffirmed that the municipality is exploring plans to revive the Expanded Public Works Programme and further announced that the council has given the city the green light to resuscitate the programme."

Sisilana reassured the public that the municipality aims to create new opportunities for young people aged 18 to 35, pledging that the city would equip them with relevant skills for the job market.

"The mayor reassured the people of eThekweni that innovative ways of ensuring the programme serves its purpose will be explored," she said.

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