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Ramaphosa's jobs vow meets frosty reception

Five million positions planned for province, but existing EPWP workers vent frustration

ZIYANDA ZWENI and APHIWE DEKLERK

As President Cyril Ramaphosa promised five million jobs to Eastern Cape residents on Wednesday, hundreds of workers in the crowd protested over the expanded public works programme he was touting.

Ramaphosa was in East London to celebrate 20 years of the government's jobs programme. He told thousands of people at the Buffalo City stadium that over the next five years the programme would create a million jobs a year across the country.

"We are confident that phase five of the EPWP will grow."

"We are targeting having five-million participants in the next five years in the phase we are entering, compared with 14-million in the past 20 years."

"We believe creating five-million jobs ... in the next five years is possible, going on the record that we see in all our provinces. We want it to be more focused, we want it to be better because we now have experience."

Ramaphosa said the new phase of the EPWP would focus on more targeted exit strategies for participants, including training, enterprise develop-

ment and other employment opportunities.

"We have seen that EPWP is not just a side programme, it is a [critical] programme which we need to utilise to create opportunities — opportunities that will train our people, that will also help a number of people to start their own businesses."

"We have heard testimonies, we have seen that it has the capacity and the ability to do so."

The government would treat the EPWP as an impactful and critical government programme that would ensure the money allocated would not be abused.

It would also ensure nepotism was blocked.

The EPWP programme is mainly used by municipalities to clean up community living spaces, patch potholes, clear bushes and cut grass.

For years, opposition parties have criticised the programme, claiming it is used by the ruling party to give jobs to members and supporters.

But while Ramaphosa was delivering his speech, hundreds of disgruntled EPWP workers held up placards protesting against a new government policy which would see them out of work after two years.

Some said the new policy contradicted Ramaphosa's 2018 promise that EPWP workers should be absorbed by mu-



PROMISES, PROMISES: President Cyril Ramaphosa addresses a crowd at the 20th anniversary of the EPW programme in East London on Wednesday. Pictures: SINDI MAJANQAZA

nicipalities.

They said they wanted to remain on the programme until retirement age, not just for two years.

Deputy public works and infrastructure minister Bernice Swarts tried to calm the disgruntled workers as Ramaphosa was speaking.

Thobeka Faltein, a community health worker, told Swarts some EPWP workers in health institutions in BCM had been working for about 20 years

without proper jobs or benefits.

She has been an EPWP worker for 12 years.

"Our pleas fall on deaf ears."

"When we take our grievances to the health department, they refer us to public works and back and forth."

"We don't know who we belong to."

"I started out earning R1,500. We were at the forefront of Covid-19, HIV & Aids and TB."

"If we tested positive we went

and sat at home for three months without pay."

"We can't even get RDP houses because we [don't qualify]."

"As we stand here, we are not sure we will be paid this month."

Mpumezzo Gxaxa, 44, who has been working for BCM solid waste since 2017, said their salaries were laughable.

"We are on contract."

"We are paid R2,700 that is taxed."

"Why is it only us here who

are earning so little money?"

"In Gqeberha, EPWP workers earn more than R5,000."

"Our overtime has been scrapped."

"We have been hearing rumours that we will be permanently employed, but people who came after us are getting permanent jobs."

"When are they employing us?"

Addressing the workers, Swarts lambasted them for causing a scene while the president was speaking.

She acknowledged the EPWP was not full-time employment.

But the workers fired back that in Gauteng EPWP workers were employed permanently.

"First of all we must determine where you are working and what your contracts say in the clinics where you work," Swarts said.

"If they are sending you to us it is incorrect because as public works we oversee the whole of government ...



FEELING ABANDONED: Disgruntled workers protest at the Buffalo City Stadium during President Cyril Ramaphosa's address on Wednesday.

"According to the Labour Act, we must now determine when the contracts end and when they renew them, what the conditions are."

"Many people are unhappy with the amount they are paid because EPWP doesn't have a standard amount."

"That is why we say with phase five being launched by the government today, there must be no EPWP worker working without having a certificate that certifies what they do."

"All these problems you are describing should have been sorted before a programme starts."

"These are the things we must fix."

"The only thing I'm against is that, as the president was talking you didn't keep quiet and sing afterwards."

Swarts asked the irate workers to send their grievances to her department.

Also speaking at the event, Eastern Cape premier Oscar Mabuyane used part of his speech to assure Ramaphosa that he would be re-elected as president of the country without being in a coalition government.

Speaking about the EPWP programme, he said: "The Eastern Cape has contributed more than 1.6 million work opportunities in the EPWP programme over the past 20 years."