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Title: 'Root out bogus employees'

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Author: Ciaran Ryan

'Root out bogus employees'

OFFENDERS: EDUCATION, COPS AND PRASA ACCOUNT FOR BILLIONS LOST TO GHOST WORKERS

» Ridding SA of govt scammers would be a huge relief to the fiscus.

Ciaran Ryan

Moneyweb

While the numbers are still uncertain, what is not in doubt is that there are probably tens of thousands of "ghost workers" – bogus employees whose pay is being collected by others – in government today.

And they have cost taxpayers billions of rands.

It's a question that must be confronted if government is to bring down public sector spending, which accounts for about a third of state spending.

Considering the admitted laxity of controls in SA's public sector, we can assume the local figure is high. Given the expected public wage bill of close to R800 billion in the current fiscal year – which does not include the roughly R85 billion a year in salaries paid to employees of state-owned companies – ridding the country of scammers would be a huge relief to the fiscus.

There's enough anecdotal evidence to raise alarms, such as the 2 143 "suspicious" employees identified at the Passenger Rail Agency of SA (Prasa) in 2022, more than half of whom "resigned" when these were investigated under Project Ziveze ("Reveal yourself"), an initiative aimed at determining the total number of employees at Prasa.

The Special Investigating Unit



SOME SHUT-EYE

A man sleeps beside a mural of Hindu deity Shiva, the god of destruction, in Varanasi, India, yesterday. Picture: AFP

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► In 2002, the AG flagged more than 60 municipalities with payroll control issues, which suggests the ghost employee issue poisons every tier of government.

ers at the Mpumalanga department of education.

In 2023, the City of Tshwane found that nearly 500 of workers on its Expanded Public Works Programme could not be verified.

The monthly saving once these were eliminated from the payroll was R2 million. But that may not

be the end of the problem, after recent claims by the Progressive Civic Congress that Tshwane has more ghost workers on its payroll than all other municipalities.

The Gauteng health department last month froze the salaries of 230 employees who could not be verified. This is a small fraction of the 85 000 employed by the department, but the campaign to root out the freeloaders is far from over.

Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure Dean Macpherson launched a campaign last month to root out ghost workers, more than 5 000 of whom receive salaries but do not work for the department. The department

oversees public sector infrastructure programmes and manages state assets, and wants to set the tone for the rest of government in eliminating fraud, including ghost workers.

"We have begun an important audit of our workforce in public works where every employee will have to report to an office to physically verify themselves," said Macpherson.

"This will help us ensure we only pay employees who are actually working to turn South Africa into a construction site."

The campaign against ghost workers appears to be getting the attention it deserves.

Last week, the department of public service and administration, responsible for overseeing more than 1.2 million public sector workers, appeared before parliament to brief its portfolio committee on steps it is taking to clean up the pervasive problem of ghost workers on the government payroll.

In April, the DA laid charges of corruption against Minister of Human Settlements Thembu Simelane, who is alleged to have received more than R700 000 from Eskom while employed at Vitrovia, a consulting firm hired to suppress protests at Kusile Power Station during its construction.

Simelane, who denies the charges, is claimed to have over-billed Eskom for work performed by ghost employees.

Based on the available evidence, there are tens of thousands of ghost workers across the public sector, costing billions of rands a year. The elimination of ghost workers at Prasa alone saved it R200 million.

The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners said ghost employees account for 8% occupational fraud cases worldwide.