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Author: CHRIS NDALISO

OFFICIALS UNDER FIRE FOR UNAUTHORISED PROMISES TO UNEMPLOYED YOUTH

CHRIS NDALISO

A senior Msunduzi official and councillor are at the centre of controversy after allegedly making unauthorised promises of payment to more than 40 unemployed youth.

The group, recruited via a WhatsApp community group by Msunduzi Patriotic Alliance (PA) councillor Randall Adams and allegedly sanctioned by City official Mandla Zuma, was brought in to clean up refuse piling up in the streets during last month's Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP) workers' strike.

The strike, driven by demands for permanent employment, saw bins overturned and rubbish scattered across the city.

The unemployed youth, mostly from Northdale, Woodlands, and Copesville, said they were promised payment for their work but, five weeks later, they claim to have received neither money nor communication from the municipality.

Frustrated, the group marched to City Hall last Friday demanding answers.

"Councillor Adams used a WhatsApp group to ask unemployed youth to help clean the city during the crisis. He assured us we would be paid, even though he didn't specify the amount. We worked for three days. Since then, we've heard nothing, and when we went to City Hall, no one attended to us," said one of the recruits, Brenton Benjamin.

Vusi Xaba, another recruit, said he felt used and that the City's handling of the matter was demoralising. He said unemployed young people would do anything if promised work and pay.

An internal City source described the recruitment as highly irregular, saying proper procedures were not followed.

"All recruitment and payment processes in the municipality require approval at multiple levels. In this case, it appears those protocols were ignored. I feel for those young people — they were taken advantage of," the source said.

Councillor Douglas Roberts, who serves on the City's Finance committee, echoed these concerns. He questioned the legality of the hiring process and the lack of transparency from City officials.

"After raising the issue with senior managers, I was told both the City manager and CFO were unaware of any such arrangement. The waste management manager was reportedly away at the time, leaving Mandla Zuma in charge. That Adams and Zuma acted without proper authority is deeply troubling and, five weeks on, the workers remain unpaid," said Roberts.

Councillor Garth Middleton, who has been engaging with affected recruits, said Adams breached the councillor's code of conduct.

"No provision in the code allows councillors to recruit individuals directly from their communities or treat them as temporary employees. This is unsafe, illegal, and completely irregular," said Middleton.

He called for immediate payments to the volunteers and for all involved officials and councillors to reimburse the City.

"The CFO must file an urgent report to the Executive Committee so that payments can be approved. Furthermore, every councillor and official involved must repay the City personally. This cannot be swept under the rug," Middleton said.

When contacted, Zuma said he had been responding to a crisis and that an official statement would be issued by the City's communications department.

Councillor Adams told *The Witness* he would return the call after confirming "something" with the City manager; however, Adams did not return the call and did not answer numerous calls thereafter.

Msunduzi Municipality spokesperson, Ntobeko Mkhize, confirmed that the City is investigating the matter, saying they were already engaging with those who were affected.

"We acknowledge that there may have been a misunderstanding which created the impression that payments would be made on a specific day. However, this has since been clarified ... and ongoing engagements are being held to ensure that the matter is resolved in a lawful and transparent manner," Mkhize said.

She added that the municipality is bound by legislative and administrative procedures that must be followed before any payment can be effected.