



A Reflection on 2013 Wage Negotiations



The Bill of Rights is a cornerstone of democracy in South Africa. It enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom.

Workers' Rights

Some sections in the **Bill of Rights** specifically refer to workers. **Section 23** refers to labour relations and guarantees workers the right to fair labour practices, to form and join trade unions and to participate in union activities and strikes.

Employers' Rights

Likewise, **employers have the right to form and join employers' organisations and to take part in their activities.** These groups have the right to organise, form federations and engage in collective bargaining. The right to strike is written into the Constitution, but the right of employers to lock out their workers is not expressly included. However, the Labour Relations Act grants employers this right in certain situations.

Strike Season

The annual wage negotiation season, often referred to as 'strike season' is the period when wage negotiations take place across different sectors. This period has in the recent past been characterised by industrial action and work stoppages. Analysts differ about the timeframe, but strike season can last from April to September every year.

Local Media Coverage

The 2013 strike season mainly affected the **mining, construction and automobile sectors.** Wage negotiations that culminated in strikes in most instances lasted much longer than the eventual strikes. Analysts quoted in the media noted some exceptionally high pay demands from competing unions, at a time when companies were struggling in a tough international environment.

Set against the backdrop of harsh economic times in the country and unions emboldened by hefty wage increases granted in 2012, labour experts predicted difficult negotiations.

Prominent issues as covered by media

Most prominent strikes reported on

Strike Category	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Automotive/Fuel retailers strikes	101	166	44
Various strikes	67	9	40
Gold mining wage talks / strikes	17	9	76
Platinum wage talks / strikes	16	6	31
City Power strike	1	22	17
Walter Sisulu University strike	1	2	1
Municipal strikes	2	1	9
SAB strike	1	10	4
South African Airways strike	12	4	4
Construction industry strike	4	4	5
Post Office wage talks / strike	5	5	5

From August to October media concentrated mostly on the automotive and fuel retailers strikes. This was due to the impact the strikes had on the car components sector and on the vehicle manufacturing industry. Strikes and wage talks in the gold and platinum sector also attracted significant media interest mainly because of the important contribution it makes to the economy. Reporting was generally critical, concentrating on the negative impact of industrial action on the economy. A word cloud of media headlines portrays the main thrust of reporting, i.e. 'strike/ strikes, petrol, workers, BMW, Amcu, Numsa, NUM, Amplats, motor, industry and talks'.

However, media noted that the 2013 strike season was not nearly as 'destructive' in terms of violence and intimidation as previous years. Reports on violence and intimidation were sporadic. Media reported on incidents of violence and intimidation related to the strikes by petrol attendants and one death claimed to be related to this strike. During the strike at City Power in Johannesburg workers reportedly sabotaged the electricity supply in certain areas. Analysts hailed the fact that incidents of violence were sporadic and ascribed it to the fact that the labour relations system was able to manage conflict in the workplace. In other instances, media reported that employers resorted to the Labour Court for protection against violence and intimidation.

Multi-year settlements

were described as a stabilising factor in wage negotiations, with experts noting that because of these settlements in some sectors, strike action was limited. Media also noted that a high number of wage settlements were reached in sectors without any form of industrial action. In these cases slightly higher than inflation increases of between seven and nine per cent were the norm.

It was also reported that the Government, unions and business were preparing to meet at a planned year-end summit to discuss ways of minimising the collective damage caused by protracted strikes.



Media furthermore reported on developments with regard to wage negotiations or strikes, quoting representatives of labour and business, including Government. In instances where media commented they described labour demands as being 'unrealistic' and suggested that workers tended to resort to strikes too readily. Unruly behaviour by striking workers drew extensive, prominent and negative reporting.

Despite early warnings that this might be a "hard fought" strike season, the overall media view was that in general all parties involved acted responsibly; engaging in protracted negotiations to avoid strikes where possible or to keep them as short as possible if unavoidable; and mostly steering clear of violence and intimidation.

Duration of negotiations / strikes & indications of intimidation

Category	09 Jul	16 Jul	23 Jul	30 Jul	6 Aug	13 Aug	20 Aug	27 Aug	3 Sep	10 Sep	17 Sep	24 Sep	1 Oct	8 Oct	15 Oct
Municipal															Ongoing
Coal mining sector															
Clothing industry															
South African Post Office															Ongoing
KZN teachers															
Walter Sisulu University															
Vehicle manufacturing															
Fuel retailers*															
Vehicles components															
South African Airways															
Construction industry															
Gold mining															
City Power**															
Amplats**															
SAB															Ongoing

Legend: Violence/intimidation (Red), Negotiations (Blue), Strikes (Yellow)

As can be deduced from the graph above many of the strikes only followed protracted negotiations. Except for the strikes related to education and the automotive industry, most of the strikes prominently reported on in media were resolved quickly. The automotive industry was however hit by multiple and successive strikes, leading to harsh pronouncements on "labour instability" in South Africa from the side of manufacturers and claims of "blackmail" from unions.

* Some negotiations started long before the period analysed here.
** Judging from media coverage, strikes such as these apparently started without preceding negotiations and were not wage related.

Although The Star carried the 3rd highest volume of coverage, the tone was more negative compared to other media. The SABC provided balanced coverage and featured more positive reporting than other media.

Coverage by media source and by-line

Volume and tonality of reporting by journalists / bylines

Journalist	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Sapa	16	34	12
Luyolo Mkentane	6	24	2
Reuters	8	14	0
Steven Tau	6	13	2
Penwell Dlamini	4	9	4
Karl Gernetsky	7	8	0
Roy Cokayne	6	7	2
Bloomberg	6	6	1
Helene Cilliers	5	7	0

Volume and tonality of strike coverage by media source

Media Source	Negative	Neutral	Positive
The Witness	1	9	3
Cape Argus	1	8	4
eNCA	2	8	4
The Sowetan	2	11	4
Daily Mercury	4	11	4
Dispatch	4	10	7
Sun	3	15	3
Times	2	12	8
The News	3	11	12
Herald	1	18	8
The Radio 702	5	15	10
SAFM	5	19	5
Beeld	4	22	20
SABC	9	34	11
Business Day	6	31	22
The Star	33	32	22
The Citizen	48	22	22
The New Age	44	28	28

During the reporting period *The New Age* was the main source of coverage on the strikes, followed by *The Citizen* and *The Star*. Most of the 'top' sources offered neutral coverage on the matter. *The Star* and *Pretoria News* (mostly through *Business Day*), *Business Day* and *Beeld* tended to be slightly more negative on the strikes and *Pretoria News* was limited (except for news generated by Sapa) and concentrated on the settlement of wage disputes.

Luyolo Mkentane of *The New Age* wrote by far the most articles about the 2013 strike season, though most of them were neutral and factual in nature. Penwell Dlamini of *The Times* wrote fewer articles, but with a more positive slant, mostly on strikes that were about to be resolved. It would, however, be worth considering engaging these journalists and the publications they write for in future communication regarding labour issues.

International Media Coverage

International media also reported extensively on the strikes, their impact on the South African economy and the perceived cost of doing business in the country. Government's voice was also covered in international media, calling for calm and for speedy and peaceful resolutions to labour disputes. Reporting by Reuters was negative to neutral with no positive coverage.

Government's Voice in Media

Government maintained a strong share of voice through various spokespeople who articulated South African labour differentiation, warned that jobs should be at the centre of the negotiations, urged parties to resolve their differences speedily and even intervened to help to resolve certain situations. The analysis of local and international media reporting showed that Government played an active role in mitigating the damage done to all parties as a result of strike action.

Labour

Despite the 44% share of voice enjoyed by labour, media was generally sympathetic to business, which only enjoyed a 26% share of voice. A vast number of analysts, businesspeople and international stakeholders were quoted emphasising the damage done to the economy. In addition, they highlighted the potential damage to foreign direct investment, the country's reputation as a reliable export partner and the impact it could have on job creation. There was however also empathy with the difficulties faced by workers and the effect it had on them and their families.

How business was perceived in the media

In certain instances businesses for adopting an adversarial stance during negotiations. This often resulted in a stalemate and strike action. The unsecured loan industry was also singled out as a key contributing factor to the escalating wage demands of workers.

In Summary

There was a discernable shift in sentiment during the period against worker demands, particularly given the unrealistic expectations in the context of the global recession, as well as some of the tactics deployed.



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