



South African Transport and Allied Workers Union

HEAD OFFICE

SATAWU Reflection on the Planned Privatisation of the Passenger and Freight Rail Sector 20/02/2023

The National Office Bearers (NOBs) of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) have been engaged in a series of critical analyses that grapple with the state and future of the transport industry, in general, passenger and freight rail sector, in particular. The character of the union necessitates that it advances the interests of transport, contract cleaning and private security employees at all material times. The union in and of itself is convicted with discourses and policy trajectories that shape and influence the occupational, socioeconomic and material conditions of both organised and unorganised workers located in the aforementioned industries.

The announcement by the President of the Republic of South Africa (Cyril Ramaphosa), in his State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 9 February 2023, on one hand, and the recent proclamations of Transnet management on the other, have been received with dejection, discontent and despondency by the union's members, office bearers and constituencies. However, SATAWU concurs with the diagnosis by the President regarding the "...years underinvestment, lack of maintenance, criminal activity and inefficiency" that have plagued the rail sector. We further support the notion of modernisation as one of many critical variables to address the challenges confronting the rail sector. On the other end, we vehemently reject the proposed reforms to be introduced in realising the modernisation project. We strongly believe that third-party access (private sector) and regressive restructuring efforts are not and/or should not be treated as silver bullets to turning things around in both the passenger and freight rail sector.

What the union found bewildering was the President's announcement of organised labour's approval for the White Paper on the National Rail Policy. The policy was approved by the cabinet in March 2022. The Minister of Transport (Fikile Mbalula) gazetted the said policy for information purposes in May of the same year. At no stage before the promulgation of the White Paper on the National Rail Policy was organised labour consulted and equally requested to make submissions to the Department of Transport (DoT) and Department of Public Enterprise (DPE). This does not mean that the President's statement is disingenuous but suggests that Tripartite Institutions such as NEDLAC (National Economic Development and Labour Council) might have been employed to adopt the White Paper on the National Rail Policy without consultation and/or mandate from the relevant trade union affiliates. Should the latter assumption be true, it suggests that such institutions encompass oligarchic tendencies owing to their overreach and abuse of power.

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The developments in question enabled Transnet to opportunistically reveal and/or announce its intentions to grant the private sector lease agreements to manage/run some of its operations such as the Durban to Johannesburg corridor for the next 20 years. According to media reports, a private logistics company was successful in its bid to obtain rights to run some of Transnet's operations. Likewise, the White Paper on National Rail Policy, Government and Transnet management's announcements do not make any mention of Section 197 of the Labour Relations Act (transfer of employees), the future of collective bargaining and employee job security. The union equally cannot comprehend why the Government and Transnet are eager to jeopardise the livelihoods and aggravate the vulnerabilities of ordinary workers.

Similarly, the strategy to devolve passenger rail suggests that the government has divorced itself from realising its vision of an integrated public transport strategy that mitigates both the historical and structural effects of the former apartheid regime. An integrated public transport system coupled with spatial planning is essential for addressing affordability, safety and reliability challenges that not only affect mobility but equally hamper a commuter's exposure and access to economic opportunities.

The market-fundamentalist agenda advanced by the Government and Transnet has been to the detriment of workers in other SOEs such as South African Airways (SAA) following the shareholder's (DPE) decision to privatise the entity through a strategic equity partnership process. Furthermore, empirical evidence has demonstrated that many countries in the global north have embarked on the process of repurchasing entities from the private sector to be managed and operated by the state. Likewise, concessioning and/ or privatisation in economic regions such as Latin America have also failed. The implementation of rapid reforms and failed economic strategies demonstrate that the current South African government has opted to maximise profit by creating markets for the private sector as opposed to protecting and transforming the socioeconomic conditions of both ordinary workers and the marginalised located in the peripheries of the South African economy.

The actions of Government and Transnet management insinuate that blacks, in general, and Africans, in particular, are unable to manage their socioeconomic affairs, therefore the private sector which is predominantly white has the knowledge, skills and attributes to turn things around for the South African native. These material conditions not only reproduce structural inequalities but justify negative stereotypes such as the native's inferiority complex, dependency and lack of ability to evolve social and economic relations without being guided, monitored and aided by their other counterparts.

Certainly, the transport workers located in the passenger and freight rail sector have every right to cry for their beloved country since their hard-earned gains and revolutionary sacrifices have been betrayed for neo-colonial conditions. The union will continue to employ existing and equally explore new networks (progressive organisations) that share a commonality of interest to refine and sharpen strategies and tactics that are essential for safeguarding the livelihoods of workers, on one hand, and to avert public goods from being auctioned and transferred to the private sector, on the other.

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