

Sentech workers strike for 13th cheque

State-owned broadcasting signal distributor Sentech said yesterday its employees have embarked on a strike over wages.



(Image extracted from the Sentech website)

The strike could disrupt the signal services Sentech provides.

The company has been locked in negotiations with the Communication Workers Union (CWU) in a bid to resolve the impasse. The strike started on Saturday.

Sentech provides signal to TV stations like the SABC, e.tv, community TV, and national, regional and community radio stations.

The strike comes as Sentech is in the process of upgrading the analogue TV broadcasting signal to digital. SA's terrestrial TV broadcasters are migrating to digital in a move that will result in more channels and free up the radio frequency spectrum needed for broadband internet connections.

Sentech said yesterday it was "naturally concerned about the impact the strike may have on our customers and stakeholders". It said the key issue of impasse was the "13th cheque".

CWU could not be reached for comment. However, its representative, Alfred Hlongwane, told online news website TechCentral members were demanding a "salary (hike), housing allowance and 13th cheque". He said workers had been demanding a 13th cheque for the past 10 years. "This year, the workers said it's do or die."

Mr Hlongwane said that the national transmission centre, which monitors and controls all Sentech broadcasting feeds, had been affected by the strike action. Management had to step in to ensure continuity of broadcasting services.

Sentech said it had proposed a number of solutions and made several concessions with a view to addressing the deadlock. "All the efforts have, however, not yielded any positive results," it said.

The utility also said the position taken by CWU "is unfortunate as it will have a negative effect to the sustainability of the business if Sentech were to accept it".

However, the agency said it would "continue to negotiate in good faith" with CWU, in the hope that the union would review its approach with "a view of enabling an amicable solution to be reached".

Sentech said it had taken "appropriate measures to ensure that services throughout the country are not affected".

SA has until June next year to switch off the TV broadcasting analogue signal.

However, it is unlikely to meet the deadline as commercial roll-out is yet to commence.

The digital migration process has been delayed by a number of factors, including disagreement over whether the set-top boxes that will be used to receive the digital signal should have a control system.

The control system, also referred to as encryption, would among other things prevent the use of counterfeit set-top boxes on the network. It would ensure all boxes meet the required standard.

Source: *Business Day*, via I-Net Bridge

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