

Simba factory workers down tools over "unfair" transport deductions

The company is in the Labour Court on Thursday afternoon to get an urgent interdict against the strikers.

By Kimberly Mutandiro^{5 Oct 2023}



Striking Simba factory workers picket inside the gates of the company's premises in Isando because security would not let them out to protest. They were eventually let out a couple of hours later. Photos: Kimberly Mutandiro | GroundUp

- Simba has asked the Labour Court in Braamfontein to urgently interdict workers from “participating, instigating or promoting” in an unprotected strike at its premises. They also want the court to declare the strike unlawful.
- This comes after more than 200 workers downed tools on Wednesday.
- The workers are being supported by the Simunye Workers’ Forum and the Casual Workers’ Advice Office.
- According to workers, the company has been deducting money from their salaries each month for transport to and from work. But they say they are meant to get transport for free as part of an earlier CCMA agreement.

Tension remains high at Simba’s factories in Isando and Elandsfontein, Gauteng on Thursday after workers downed tools and were briefly prevented from protesting outside on Wednesday. Most workers returned to work on Thursday.

On Thursday afternoon, Simba approached the Labour Court in Braamfontein for an urgent interdict against workers, the Simunye Workers’ Forum and the Casual Workers’ Advice Office, to stop them from “participating, instigating or promoting” an unprotected strike at its premises. They also want the court to declare the strike unlawful.

According to representatives from the Simunye Workers' Forum, 217 labour broker workers who were employed by Adcorp Blu were absorbed as permanent workers by Simba in 2018. "The workers had long ceased in law to be casual workers as they had, by that time, worked for several years for Simba," according to Simunye.

Simunye said that part of the settlement agreement made at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) was that workers would get free transport, paid for by Simba to and from pick-up points or at the employees' homes.



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"Workers later discovered that Simba was deducting R16 per day from each worker for the transport, instead of providing it for free. These deductions were not even listed on the payslip. The workers have been in a long-standing battle to have this money returned and free transport reinstated," Simunye said in a statement on Wednesday.

Worker representatives claim that other employees who became permanent before 2018 were not paying for transport which had caused division and unhappiness.

More than 200 workers then decided to down tools this week after Simba had cancelled the transport and instead offered a once-off payment of R30,000 if they agreed to accept this as a full and final settlement of backpay and for any future transport costs. This offer was made in April during negotiations, according to Simunye.

While waiting for the CCMA to set a date to hear the matter, more than 200 workers at Simba's Isando factory workers refused to work on Wednesday morning.



Striking Simba workers protest outside after they were prevented from leaving the premises for a couple of hours on Wednesday. The company is in court to interdict any further strike action. Photos: Kimberly Mutandiro | GroundUp

They held placards inside the gates of the premises, singing protest songs and asking to be allowed outside to protest on the streets. But the gates remained locked, forcing the workers to remain inside the gates. The gates were only opened later that afternoon.

The Simunye Workers' Forum and the Casual Workers Advice Office, who have been assisting the striking Simba employees, have written to Simba, indicating their intention to oppose the interdict application.

Jacob Potlaki, from the Casual Workers Advice Office, said, "We refuse to take this [once-off offer of R30,000] because workers are owed up to R140,000 each for the deductions. We have tried to negotiate for a better amount than the R30,000 being offered without success. That is why we decided to down tools."

"As we speak workers are supposed to earn around R7,000 but they are earning about R5,000," said Potlaki.

We managed to speak to a few striking workers through the gates of the Isando factory during their protests on Wednesday. One worker who has worked for Simba since 2012 said she wants the company to pay back all the money it has been deducting for transport.

"They deduct up to R2,000 from my salary every month. On top of that, they deduct money for uniforms and medical aid, which means that we are left with nothing. The company should own up to its promise of providing us with transport," she said.

At the time of publication on Thursday afternoon, Simba's urgent interdict application was still being heard by the Labour Court.

Simba did not respond to our calls and emailed questions.

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