

## **Community Fighting For Primary School Teachers**

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On 23 May 2023 at 09:00 at Qhayiya Primary School, a meeting was held by the community of Bathurst which is in the Eastern Cape. The community was forced to stand up against actions taken by the Department of Education.

Qhayiya Primary School has had a problem with a vacant teaching position for about two years in the Foundation Phase where the Department filled those positions by bringing teachers residing in Bathurst, Mrs Tokwe and Mrs Fati, who worked as principals in their local creches and are currently studying to obtain a Bachelors in Foundation Phase at Rhodes University.

The school governing body (SGB) received news from the principal that the teachers have been working for three months without payment. When they tried to investigate, the department did not recognise them as employees but brought other teachers without paying the ones who had already been working there, so the community decided to call the Department to answer them on this problem.

When the department failed to deliver to the community's expectation they took action and protested, leading to a total shutdown of the R67 on 14 June 2023 at 05:00. The Department came, and the community stakeholders were summoned to listen to the solution offered to them on 15 June 2023.

Mzwandile Sweli, a councillor in Bathurst, welcomed speakers who were present during the meeting. Included were the SGB, South African Police Services (SAPS), South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), African National Congress (ANC), and the community representatives.

"I don't want endless protests without solutions, but now the fact that it is not prioritised [means] that students did not write their June examination because of people claiming we will burn down their cars," said Sweli. He also stated that they are tired of this and are pleading with the Department to solve the problem as the primary objective is that these teachers are employed and paid as they qualify for the position of Foundation Phase.

Mr Sonanzi from SANCO who was present in the meeting managed to calm the community down and explained the situation as the department deployed new people to attend to the problem:

"I called Mr Phuphu who is under the Department of Education and is present here today. And we agreed that the department must employ teachers for these positions but when I called the department, [they] did not know of the whole situation and that Mr Matyholo who was tasked to deal with this issue did not take it seriously."

Mr Phuphu, deployed by the Department of Education in Grahamstown, started by saying they might point fingers at each other, but it really might not be a government issue. This is because Mr Matyholo did not do his job by reporting this issue so it may be solved sooner.

"We seem to forget regardless of the fact that the community is angry at him and might hurt him, but he turned a blind eye on what could happen to him." From February 2023 and May 2023, the teachers worked without being officially employed by the department,

and the department now needs to investigate how to handle the process and find the solution to all this which parents may not accept.

A 22-year-old Bathurst resident who obtained a Bachelor's in Education Foundation Phase in 2022 was also caught in the same problem. She was employed at the same school in February 2023 and signed a contract for three months. But after two weeks, she was told by the school principal that her employment was rejected by the department and her contract was terminated without her getting paid for the time she worked as an educator, and it all ended with the department investigating.

The community representative Mr Swaartboi, says, "From 1 March 2023, these teachers need to be paid and also be permanently employed as they qualify." He added that, "The reason why people decided to protest is because they feel disrespected by the Department of Education and Mr Matyholo, this happened before and now it won't stop until we take action."

Mr Phuphu concluded the meeting by speaking about how grateful he was that the community was patient enough to listen to him. The solution to the problem was either these teachers continued teaching until September 2023 while the investigation is in progress or they finish their studies, so that they can automatically be employed permanently. Alternatively, they will be paid their dues and taken back to their previous Department of Social Development (DSD) posts.

The community chose that they remain at Qhayiya Primary School until they finish with their studies and be permanently employed, it was agreed that the protest will be over, and school will continue on 19 June 2023.

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