

Lives of poor and working-class people upended by violent taxi strike

“Ordinary people like me are the ones suffering” says patient as clinic

services impacted by taxi strike.

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Most municipal services in communities such as Browns Farm, Philippi East, Nyanga and Samora Machel in Cape Town have been suspended, with some schools and clinics closed due to threats of violence related to the ongoing taxi strike..

On Thursday evening, we spoke to Zandile Tyabeka from Gugulethu, who had been waiting hours for a taxi from the city centre. She was anxious to get home to her two-month-old daughter who needed to be fetched from creche.

On Friday, Tyabeka told us she eventually had to walk home from town and only arrived home at 11 pm. Fortunately, her neighbour was able to fetch her daughter from creche. “I was so scared. I didn’t go to work today,” she said.

Incidents reported on Friday morning included: A Golden Arrow bus driver being shot, and vehicles set alight in Khayelitsha, Langa and Atlantis. There were also protests, with reports of tyres set alight in Atlantis, Bloekombos, Witsand and Borchards Quarry, and stone throwing along the N7 near Dunoon, where a delivery van was also set alight.

On Friday morning, our reporter walked through parts of Philippi and found that many people had stayed home while some had made their way to work using buses.

The Inzamezabantu and Crossroads community health centres operated with skeleton staff and only patients with chronic conditions were being seen. A patient at Inzamezabantu, Mziwenceba Apleni, told GroundUp that he was refused service because his illness was not deemed urgent.

“I come to this clinic once a week and now a doctor has not seen me because people that are allowed inside are those with serious conditions,” said Apleni.

Another patient at Mzamomhle clinic, Athule Bango, who was interviewed just after 8am, said: “Normally the clinic opens after 7am. I have been waiting here since then and not even a single nurse has come to work yet except the security guards. Other patients decided to leave by 8am. I had an appointment to collect my medication and I don’t know how going without that medication for a week will affect me. The strike really had an impact on us. I am hoping whatever differences they have will be sorted out because ordinary people like me are the ones suffering.”

Attendance at schools in the community was also hit hard. Affected schools in Philippi include Sinethemba Senior Secondary, Intsebenziswano Senior Secondary, and Sophumelela High, while Zisukhanyo High in Samora Machel looked empty.

Sinethemba Senior Secondary School learner Vumile Golozana said when he arrived at the school the gates were locked and there were no teachers.

“The janitor said there is no school because of the taxi protest. We are missing out on teaching and learning,” he said.

There appeared to be more learners at primary schools, though our reporter was told that schools would be sending the learners home earlier than usual, fearing violent flare ups.

The Browns Farm library was also closed, although staff members were inside the building.

The sight of Avanzas (Amaphela) taxis are frequent in the township, but they were notably absent on Friday. A worker, who did not want his name published, said he stayed home because he did not have transport to go to work. “I was going to get a lift from a friend who works in the same vicinity as I do but I was scared because there were messages on social media that there should not be more than two people in a car.

“I did not want to risk my life and decided to stay at home.” He said the policy at his workplace was no work, no pay.

The City of Cape Town stated thousands of people were stranded “due to sustained attacks on other public transport services, with incidents of stoning of private vehicles and blockading of major routes”.

The unattributed statement said several city facilities in volatile areas had been closed to protect the safety of staff, and to prevent vandalism and attacks on the infrastructure.

The City was monitoring MyCiTi bus routes, and areas where Dial-a-Ride operates.

The routes most impacted were those from the Civic Centre to Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha, Atlantis, Dunoon, Killarney, Milnerton, and Joe Slovo. The City stated buses had been stoned, had been roads blocked with burning tyres, and weapons had been pointed at bus drivers.

“Law Enforcement vehicles are escorting the buses and vehicles on routes that are volatile,” read the statement, adding that the City and provincial government were gathering evidence of damage to infrastructure and incitement to violence.

In Mfuleni, informal vendor Nomsa Feni, said she saw people stoning a Golden Arrow bus near Mfuleni Taxi Rank, which is adjacent to the police station, on Thursday. “Taxi marshals and other people who work with taxi drivers threw stones at a Golden Arrow bus. Afterwards, they moved towards the police station and hurled stones at it,” she said.

“The police called for a backup and fired rubber bullets at them. The taxi rank was swarming with police.” Feni said there was also a scuffle between taxi owners and taxi drivers after they were instructed to stop working.

Nonceba Mahlabe said: “Residents were running in all directions as the police fired rubber bullets. The taxi violence that happened here forced us to stop selling and go home early. We were scared to get caught up in the violence.”

Officers at the police station opposite Mfuleni Taxi rank confirmed the incidents. “A group of about 30 people stoned a Golden Arrow Bus. They threw stones at the police station afterwards. We called for more police for assistance and then chased them away. The stones fell on the roof. Nothing was damaged,” said a police official.

Mfuleni Taxi Rank was unusually quiet and empty on Friday morning.

Feni said: “Residents and some street vendors did not come to the taxi rank because they feared a repeat of yesterday’s violence. Even school kids didn’t come here today. I normally make around R50 by this time, but today I only made R9,” she said.

Mahlabe said: “I usually have R300 by midday, but I have not made even a cent.” She said she wants the City of Cape Town and the taxi bosses to resolve their dispute so taxis could run again.

Malvern De Bruyn, Western Cape COSATU Provincial Secretary, called on the City and the taxi bosses to resolve their disagreement at the negotiating table.

“Traffic officers, taxi drivers and commuters are all workers, and no blood should be shed by anyone,” he said.

When GroundUp visited Cape Town station shortly after 7am on Friday it was unusually quiet, except for a couple of cleaners and security guards. City of Cape Town Law Enforcement and SAPS officers were monitoring the area.

On Friday morning a security guard at the station deck taxi rank said some commuters had slept at the station.

Most vendor shops and stalls were closed.

Vendor Mike Godson, who sells beanies and scarves, said he was worried about making money during the strike as he relied on foot traffic from people going to the taxi rank. “It was chaotic yesterday. People were only focused on getting home,” he said.

At the bus terminus, Golden Arrow buses were busy loading commuters, most of whom were night shift workers, for the journey home. Golden Arrow Bus Services early on Friday stated it would assist commuters across the city as best as it could.

“Our intention is to operate on all routes with diversions in places. Unfortunately, we will not be able to confirm whether each scheduled bus will operate as it normally does but our aim is to provide as much coverage as possible and to run the services until we have as many passengers as possible,” the statement read.

Meanwhile, the MyCiTi bus service posted that their call centres were experiencing “extremely high call volumes”. They encouraged commuters to check the App or social media for the latest updates and announcements.

Mayco Member for Safety and Security JP Smith on Friday said the City’s law enforcement would “maintain a high visibility presence in all hotspot areas, working closely with SAPS to monitor, and respond to any incidents that occur.

“Escorts of bus services are continuing, to ensure a safe passage for commuters.”

Eskom spokesperson Danielle Lewis stated that a company vehicle was petrol bombed in the early hours of Friday in Khayelitsha. The Eskom employee was off duty, but Eskom security was investigating the incident. “Unfortunately, various incidents are being reported across the Cape Peninsula that delays Eskom from responding rapidly to faults,” Lewis stated.

Services were suspended in Khayelitsha, Delft, Belhar, Du Noon, Philippi, and Fisantekraal. “Eskom will exercise extreme caution when delivering services to other Eskom supply areas,” stated Lewis.

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