

ACTION ILLEGAL, CHIEF WARNS

Legal aid staff plan go slow in pay battle

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HUNDREDS of unionised Legal Aid Board (LAB) lawyers and administrative staff are planning to "make the court system grind to a halt" across South Africa from tomorrow if the Department of Justice refuses to pay them salaries on a par with their peers in the department and the National Prosecuting Authority.

It is understood several members staged sit-ins yesterday by refusing to leave their offices to appear for clients in magistrate's and regional courts in Cape Town, across the Western Cape, and in some towns and cities in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

Advocate Andre Paries, chair of the South African Parastatal and Tertiary Institutions Union (Saptu) Legal Aid Board (LAB) division, said between 500 and 600 Saptu-affiliated staff members of the LAB, which employs about 1 600 lawyers nationwide, would down tools if a meeting with LAB management in Braamfontein tomorrow did not produce "good news".

He said the union wanted the board's management to negotiate with the department on its behalf.

A few non-unionised members were planning to show solidarity, Paries said.

The economic climate made it hard for LAB members "who provided a good service to the poor" to cover the basic costs of living, the union said.

But Western Cape Justice

Department head Hishaam Mohamed said strikers would "run into serious trouble" under the Labour Relations Act because their work was classified as an essential service and they were not allowed to strike.

Paries said most LAB staff members did not want to strike because no one wanted to hurt their clients. The situation had, however, "reached boiling point" because attempts to gain answers from Justice and Constitutional Development Minister Brigitte Mabandla on pay increases had failed.

The board said last night it was "aware that some of its staff had or were ... engaging in industrial action, including orchestrating 'go slow' action aimed at retarding work".

"The board is supposed to be notified of industrial action. We have not been notified," the LAB's chief operations officer, Jerry Makokoane, said.

"The management of the board has been updating staff on related salary developments.

"Unions are involved in the process and they are aware of the procedures that they need to follow before they can embark on any action or strike.

"The Legal Aid Board provides legal representation to more than 400 000 poor South Africans a year. We are mandated to protect and defend these rights, therefore an industrial action, including a 'go-slow' strike, cannot be an option."

Justice ministry spokesperson Zolile Nqayi referred all inquiries to the board.

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