

Blow as Legal Aid bosses get hefty bonuses

Lower ranks battle for upgrades

By **ELLA SMOOK**
Staff Reporter

Legal Aid lawyers, who this week applied for a certificate to launch strike action to protest against the failure to upgrade employees' salaries, are facing another blow with news that their senior executives will today pocket "exorbitant bonuses".

Documents in the Cape Argus's possession show that senior Legal Aid Board managers will be paid performance bonuses of up to 30%, while non-management staff - including the lawyers - can expect bonuses equalling just 8% of their salary packages.

The issue of the bonuses is a burning one within the organisation, and if the dispute blows up there are predictions of serious disruption to the country's courts.

"Legal Aid Board employees will argue that the justice system is failing them and their indigent clients.

"Should an indigent client be afforded an indigent lawyer?" was the question posed by the South African Parastatal Tertiary Union, which represents the Legal Aid lawyers.

A well-placed source alleged that about R2 million in bonuses would be paid to the top 12 Legal Aid Board executives, with almost R300 000 going to the chief executive.



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Executive bonuses far exceed the total annual packages of lower-ranked staff.

Vidhu Vedalankar, the Board's chief executive, said in response to questions about the size of the bonuses being paid to senior management that the bonuses were structured on a sliding scale based on the level of responsibility attached to a position and the nature of the employment contract.

This, he said, was in line with the practice in most organisations.

But the union countered that as a public-funded institution which does not make a profit, the Legal Aid Board cannot be compared with private sector businesses.

Furthermore, it said, the managers were "already being paid exceptionally well for their skills, hence the exorbitant bonus is unnecessary".

The union charged that the "unfair bonus system" was "decided by executives to enrich themselves", while non-managerial salaries and human resources were "poorly budgeted for and managed".

Extreme unhappiness over the bonuses was expressed by

several sources who said "junior staff (were) put in harm's way and working 12-hour days", while senior staff claim "irregular and exceptionally high bonuses" on top of their "already exorbitant salaries".

The issue of management remuneration was questioned by ANC MP Pierre-Jeanne Gerber at a Scopa hearing in October last year.

Minutes of that meeting record that "Mr Gerber noticed that the executive management remuneration amounted to R6.1m, and bonuses paid amounted to R2.1m, which was almost 30%.

He asked why the figure was so high".

Chairman of the board, Judge Dunstan Mlambo, responded then that the executives of the Legal Aid Board were all prepared to go the extra mile, and that was why the board took a decision to pitch their bonuses at 30%.

Vedalankar said this week that the incentive-based performance management system was introduced as a means to incentivise performance.

The provision of quality legal services to an ever-increasing numbers of clients - a total 400 000 new matters every year - as well as the reception of unqualified audit reports seven years in a row, bore testimony to the success of the system, he said.

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By STAFF

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