

# South Africa: Numsa denies ‘politicised’ workers are a threat to Eskom

Tuesday 9 July 2019, by [MARRIAN Natasha](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2019).

**Senior ANC and alliance leaders say the politicisation of Eskom’s workforce will be a key challenge to any turnaround plan at the utility, in part because of the decision by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) to contest the 2019 election with its newly formed Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party.**

But Numsa general secretary Irvin Jim this week in an interview dismissed as “cheap propaganda” suggestions that the union’s stance on the ailing power utility is political, aimed at harming the ANC and bolstering the union’s own political party.

“It is workers’ interest that we are pushing. We have to be the voice of the working class in all sectors of society,” he said.

Eskom is on a collision course with unions over its plans to unbundle and because of its deals with independent power producers (IPPs).

Although the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), aligned to trade union federation Cosatu, has the majority membership at Eskom, representing about 18 000 workers, Numsa has a strong presence, with about 9 000 workers, and has been decidedly vocal in its opposition to both IPPs and unbundling. The total Eskom workforce, according to its 2017 annual report, is 47 658.

The leaders have accused Numsa, the country’s largest union, of playing politics as the situation at Eskom worsens and for taking an anti-President Cyril Ramaphosa stance, an allegation it rejects.

Jim said Numsa’s stance on renewables, privatisation and unbundling was consistent with its ideological outlook and the positions were adopted as far back as 2013.

The Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party is contesting the elections after a decision taken in 2013, which culminated in its expulsion from Cosatu.

“It is a cheap attack to say we’re doing this for votes.

Our positions on these things are historical,” he said.

The union’s close links to Matshela Koko, Eskom’s former chief executive embroiled in allegations of state capture and corruption, have also been questioned.

But Jim said he was free to “talk to anybody” and his stance on IPPs and that of Koko’s happened to be aligned. Koko was a member of the NUM during his time at Eskom.

The NUM sector co-ordinator, Paris Mashego, said the union had asked Numsa to join some meetings about Eskom with ANC and government leaders, but the metalworkers’ union had refused

because they were now a “different political party”.

Mashego said NUM’s relationship with the Numsa was important because no union could win the Eskom battle on its own. This was echoed by Jim, who said the unity of all workers was critical to save jobs.

But there are differences in the NUM over the approach to the Eskom matter. It is understood that the NUM in the Highveld region, which organises workers at Eskom, includes a “cocktail” of political allegiances, including to the Economic Freedom Fighters. Sections of the region had traditionally felt the union was too close to the ANC and the South African Communist Party.

Ramaphosa, Public Enterprises Minister Pravin Gordhan and Energy Minister Jeff Radebe met the NUM this week at its offices, in which the dire position of Eskom was outlined.

NUM general secretary David Sipunzi said consultations would be held with members to call off the “total shutdown” planned for the week running up to the elections as a result of the meeting, but a march to Luthuli House would go ahead.

He said this week’s meeting was the first with the government since plans to unbundle Eskom were announced in February.

“The meeting with the president yielded some hope and he promised engagement going forward,” Sipunzi said.

Although rolling mass action was considered before the meeting, Sipunzi said the union now understood how serious the position is.

“We love this country very much. We chose rolling mass action when it seemed the ANC was not listening but, after the meeting yesterday, we will have to go back and explain the situation to workers,” he said.

The NUM will meet them next week.

Numsa is aligned to the newly formed federation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions. Saftu was planning a total shutdown on March 26 and March 27, but there is now a debate over whether the action will proceed, according to Jim.

This week Eskom implemented stage four load-shedding, with no certainty when it will end, given the comments by Gordhan and Eskom board chairperson Jabu Mabuza at a media briefing. The power utility will outline a way forward in about 10 to 14 days.

Natasha Marrian is Mail & Guardian’s politics editor.

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