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Public sector workers to receive report back on wage talks

PUBLIC sector unions will meet across four provinces on Wednesday to receive a report back on wage talks with the government and decide a way forward after the deadline for negotiations passed on April 1.

The talks between the government and unions representing public servants have thus far been acrimonious. Tension between parties deepened after the government lodged a dispute on March 27, saying it had "exhausted" its mandate. This is the first time the employer, and not unions, has lodged a dispute during public-sector wage talks.

The government has repeatedly said an above-inflation increase is unaffordable.

The Finance and Fiscal Commission (FFC) last year warned of the dangers of the rapid escalation of the public-sector wage bill and urged the government to moderate its expenditure on salaries to achieve its goal of fiscal consolidation.

SA's public-sector wage bill of more than R400bn ranks among the highest compared with countries at a similar level of economic development. There are about 1.3-million funded posts in the public sector and the rise in their wages over the past few years has not been matched by increases in productivity.

While insiders say a strike seems inevitable in this round of wage talks, workers on Wednesday will give union leaders direction on the approach to take.

The government's last offer stood at 5.8%, while workers are asking for a 10% wage hike.

Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) public service trade unions co-ordinator Sifiso Khumalo said the next step would be conciliation between parties, through the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council.

Tentative dates have been provided for conciliation, but they have to be confirmed by all parties before they are announced.

The meetings on Wednesday are set to take place in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, the North West and the Western Cape.

Meanwhile, expelled Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi will reportedly be in the Western Cape on Wednesday and will be talking to workers about whether to fight to reclaim Cosatu or form an alternative federation.

Mr Vavi's attempt to talk to workers is set to be difficult after Cosatu warned all its structures and members that they should not allow him a platform to speak or attend any meetings he addresses.

Cosatu has warned that any structure or member violating the directive will be disciplined.