

Strike by retailer's employees continues

By [Siya Mti](#)

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The Woolworths employee strike for union recognition has entered its sixth day, after the parties failed to reach an agreement by the initial deadline of Sunday.

The South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) embarked on the strike, which was envisaged to last for five days, on 17 September 2008.

East London Saccawu organiser Freda Sizani said half of the staff at the Vincent Woolworths were participating in the strike. Workers have been protesting in Vincent Park's basement parking lot since last week. "We initially targeted five days, but the company has not met our demands so the stayaway continues.

"We demand recognition by the company and we believe we are substantially represented because we have recruited more than 30% of employees," said Sizani.

But Woolworths, in a statement, disputed that the union had sufficient numbers to be recognised, although, the company said, it upheld workers' freedom of association.

"Woolworths has been consistent in our approach to employee rights of freedom of association. An employee is free to join any union of their choice. Woolworths recognises the right of the union to organise its members if they demonstrate they are sufficiently representative. The vast majority of our employees (more than 85%), however, have not indicated a wish to belong to a union.

"Woolworths is clear that we will recognise any union that demonstrates sufficient representivity," said Zyda Rylands, chief operating officer of Woolworths support services.

Rylands added that Woolworths paid its employees competitive wages that were market related.

However, Sizani said the refusal by Woolworths to recognise the union was a strategy to keep wages low, as Saccawu could not negotiate for better wages without being recognised as an employee representative. "At this stage we can't negotiate better wages. By not recognising (the union), they can continue to pay us low wages. Also, most workers cannot get benefits because most are not permanent. Out of 129 staff in Vincent Park Woolworths, only eight are permanent, the rest are casuals, flexi- time and part-time," said Sizani.

According to Woolworths, "marches by Cosatu and employees" of other retailers in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town

had a minimal impact on operations.

“All stores remained open. Comprehensive contingency plans are currently in place to ensure our customers are not inconvenienced by the strike,” said a Woolworths statement.

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