

Grim times, grievances at Gupta TV venture

By Gabi Mbele

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No gum chewing, no sickbay, no cars - and if you fail to clock in on time, your salary will be docked...



Life seems rough for those who work at television station ANN7.

A string of "worker ill-treatment" complaints was submitted by the Communication Workers Union to a channel boss on Friday at the network, which is owned by the politically connected and controversial Gupta family.

This came as the station's best-known anchor, Chantal Rutter Dros, confirmed that she would be leaving the channel on 3 December "due to personal reasons".

Lazola Pukwana, the union's collective bargaining co-ordinator, said the union had approached the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration about working conditions at ANN7.

He declined to give details of the meeting with station management but said the company was not willing to budge on some of the issues.

Glamorous? Think again

A three-page document says "expat Indians in particular are expected to work as many as six days per week" and that the highest-paid employee in the company is a "white newsreader who earns R100,000 per month while the lowest-paid employees earn [about] R4,000".

Far from being glamorous and highly paid work, news reading at ANN7 earns freelance workers a mere R100 an hour, the document says.

It describes how an unidentified newsreader slipped and fell at work while on duty. "She was told she is solely responsible

for her medical bill and would not be covered under occupational health provision as she was wearing high heels."

It states that a cameraman collapsed while on duty covering the expulsion of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa from Cosatu recently.

An ambulance was called by his colleague and he was admitted to Milpark Hospital in Johannesburg. But, says the document, company bosses instructed him to leave the private hospital and seek medical admission at a public hospital - and "he was told that he is personally liable for hospitalisation".

In another case, a cameraman's salary was withheld because his camera lens was found to have been cracked.

Ill-treatment alleged

Pukwana said: "The staff has bottled all these issues up for too long. It is these elements of ill-treatment that are causing this high turnover of staff."

On Friday, one of several staffers who spoke on condition of anonymity said: "There is no sickbay at the office, we are not allowed to eat at our desks, not even chew gum, or we will be dealt with."

The 24-hour news channel, based in Midrand, Gauteng, went on air in August 2013. It was widely mocked for launching with a bevy of mainly inexperienced young models as news anchors; they battled to maintain their composure amid technical glitches.

ANN7 general manager Quraysh Patel said the channel was unaware of the ill-treatment of staff, and denied seeing the list of grievances. Management would "continue to meet staff and unions, when necessary". He said he was aware of two employees being injured or falling ill at work and said staff had been assisted in both cases.

Source: *Sunday Times*, via I-Net Bridge

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