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LIGHTS OUT!

What Happens to Cast and Crew When a Television Production Suddenly Ends?

ARTICLE

AUTHORS

Lesedi Mphahlele (Director) | Ilze-Marie Hall (Associate)
Mmabatho Marite (Candidate Attorney)

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What Happens to Cast and Crew When a Television Production Suddenly Ends?

Analysing the legal rights and remedies available to cast and crew following the abrupt cancellation of the SABC 2 telenovela *Pimville* amid contractual disputes between the South African Broadcasting Corporation ("SABC") and Bakwena Productions.

Introduction

The sudden discontinuation of the SABC 2 telenovela *Pimville* on 25 May 2026 has sparked widespread concern throughout South Africa's entertainment industry. Having premiered on 9 February 2026, the production was removed from broadcast after only a few months on air amid unresolved contractual disputes between the SABC and Bakwena Productions.

Whilst contractual disagreements between broadcasters and production houses are not uncommon, the *Pimville* dispute has brought to the forefront a far more important question: **When the cameras stop rolling, what happens to the actors, crew members, writers and technicians whose livelihoods depend on the production?**

Reports of alleged non-payment and uncertainty surrounding the future of the production have ignited debate regarding the legal protections available to cast and crew when a television production is abruptly brought to an end.

This article seeks to analyse the legal rights and remedies available to cast and crew in such circumstances and highlights the contractual safeguards that ought to exist within the South African film and television industry.

The Regulatory Framework

The SABC's operational and public broadcasting obligations are derived primarily from the Broadcasting Act 4 of 1999. Section 2 of the Broadcasting Act seeks to ensure that broadcasting serves the public interest and contributes towards South Africa's cultural, social and economic development. Equally, section 6 requires public broadcasting services to promote South African creativity, diversity and local content production. There can be little doubt that *Pimville* represented precisely the type of locally produced content envisaged by the Act. When a local production collapses, the consequences extend beyond the screen and directly affect the livelihoods of those responsible for bringing South African stories to life.

The Broadcasting Act must further be read alongside the Electronic Communications Act 36 of 2005, which regulates broadcasters and forms part of the broader regulatory framework governing commissioning relationships between broadcasters and independent producers.

These legislative instruments collectively create an environment in which broadcasters are expected to conduct their affairs transparently, fairly and responsibly.

Employee or Independent Contractor?

The legal rights available to cast and crew depend largely on the nature of their contractual relationship with the production company. In the South African entertainment industry, performers and technical staff are frequently engaged on fixed-term or project-based contracts and are often classified as independent contractors.

However, as South African labour law has repeatedly demonstrated the law looks beyond what a contract calls you and examines what you actually do. **Section 200A of the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995** creates a rebuttable presumption of employment where certain factors are present, including economic dependence, supervision and control, or exclusivity of service.

The practical effect is that many individuals who are labelled as independent contractors may nevertheless qualify as employees and therefore enjoy the protections afforded by labour legislation.

These protections include:

- Protection against unfair dismissal;
- Access to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration ("CCMA");
- Payment of outstanding remuneration;
- Severance pay where applicable; and
- Other statutory employment protections.

Recent regulatory developments further suggest an intention by the Minister of Employment and Labour to extend greater labour protections to performers and workers engaged in artistic and cultural activities.

The Right to Outstanding Remuneration

Perhaps the most immediate concern arising from the *Pimville* dispute is whether cast and crew members are entitled to payment for services already rendered.

The answer is straightforward, work done deserves payment. **Section 32 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997 ("BCEA")** requires employers to pay employees for services rendered within prescribed time periods. Where payment is withheld, employees earning below the applicable earnings threshold may refer disputes relating to outstanding remuneration directly to the **CCMA in terms of Section 73A of the BCEA**. Independent contractors are not without remedies.

A failure to pay employees for services rendered amounts to breach of contract and may entitle the affected individual to claim:

- Outstanding fees;
- Damages suffered as a result of the breach; or
- Specific performance compelling payment.

A production may end. Your right to payment does not. Although any claim would ordinarily lie against the production company as the employer or contracting party, complex questions may arise where a broadcaster's conduct contributes to the financial collapse of a production.

The Right to Fair Dismissal and Severance Pay

Another important consideration is whether the cancellation of a production automatically terminates the employment of cast and crew.

The answer is no. **Section 185 of the Labour Relations Act** provides that every employee has the right not to be unfairly dismissed. Even where a production is forced to cease operations due to financial or operational difficulties, employers are required to comply with the consultation and procedural requirements contained in **section 189 of the Labour Relations Act**.

A cancelled production is not a licence to ignore labour law. Failure to comply with these requirements may expose employers to claims for unfair dismissal and compensation. Furthermore, employees dismissed for operational requirements may be entitled to severance pay in accordance with **Section 41 of the BCEA**.

Whilst many *Pimville* cast and crew members may have relatively short periods of service, they may nevertheless possess rights arising from the termination of their employment.

Contractual Safeguards: Lessons from *Pimville*

The *Pimville* dispute exposes a recurring vulnerability within the entertainment industry: inadequate contractual protection for those working behind the scenes.

A well-drafted production agreement should clearly regulate:

- Termination rights;
- Notice periods;
- Consequences of early cancellation;
- Outstanding payment obligations;
- Dispute resolution procedures; and
- Financial protections for cast and crew.

Good contracts prevent disputes. Great contracts protect people. Individual performer and crew agreements should similarly contain provisions regulating compensation in circumstances where productions are prematurely terminated. The strongest protection is often negotiated before the first scene is ever filmed.

Financial Accountability Within Productions

The allegations of non-payment in the *Pimville* matter also raise broader questions regarding accountability within commissioning arrangements.

The SABC has publicly maintained that its contractual payment obligations to Bakwena Productions were met. If correct, this raises an important question regarding whether sufficient safeguards existed to ensure that funds ultimately reached the actors, technicians and production staff who performed the work.

Creative professionals should never be the last people paid and the first people harmed. One possible solution is for commissioning agreements to require production companies to provide proof that cast and crew salaries have been paid before further funding is released. While such mechanisms may be administratively burdensome, the *Pimville* matter illustrates the potentially devastating consequences of their absence.

Conclusion

The cancellation of *Pimville* is about far more than a television programme being removed from broadcast. It serves as a stark reminder of the structural vulnerabilities that continue to affect South Africa's film and television industry. When productions collapse, it is often the actors, crew members, writers and technicians who bear the greatest risk despite possessing the least bargaining power.

When the spotlight fades, legal rights should not. The law provides important protections. The challenge lies in ensuring that those protections are reinforced through robust contracts, responsible governance and meaningful industry accountability.

Contracts matter. Labour rights matter. Accountability matters.

AUTHORS: Lesedi Mphahlele (Director) | Ilze-Marie Hall (Associate) | Mmabatho Marite (Candidate Attorney)