

National miners strike in South Africa

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Miners belonging to the 250,000-strong South African National Union of Miners (NUM) took one-day strike action on Tuesday, December 4. The strike, the first national walkout by miners since the bringing down of the apartheid regime, was over the country's appalling safety record. So far this year, over 200 miners have died at work as a result of accidents, exceeding last year's total of 199.

Over the last few days there have been fatal accidents at the Anglo Platinum and Xstrata mines near Rustenburg and a miner was found dead at the Gold Fields' Kloof mine near Carletonville.

In October, around 3,000 miners at Elandsrand were trapped 1.5 kilometres underground for more than 24 hours when the power cable of the lift cage was damaged. They were eventually rescued unharmed.

Over 40,000 miners attended a rally in Johannesburg on Tuesday. An AFP report quoted Thembisile Marrent, a miner at the Kloof goldmine in Mpumalnga province, who said, "We are dying in mines but get nothing. We want change, we want to work safe. When you get accidents the boss wants to know if it was bad luck. If the mistake is yours, they charge you [with disciplinary offences] even though you are in hospital."

The miners carried placards whose slogans included, "Mine safety is a human right" and "Blood-dripped profit is the bosses' luxury."

Lesiba Sheshoka, an NUM spokesman, said, "Those who own the mines are chasing profits at the expense of people's lives. We are losing mine workers on an almost daily basis. This is because of pure negligence."

The march in Johannesburg was to the Chamber of Mines headquarters, where a petition was handed in. Amongst the demands was a call for the prosecution of negligent managers. The petition noted that there had not even been a charge of negligence since the year 2000.

In 2003, the mining companies said they would work

to reduce the fatality levels to those of Western developed countries, and whilst in 2004 the number of deaths did go down, it has continued to rise ever since.

South African mines are amongst the deepest and most labour-intensive in the world. Amongst the minerals mined are precious metals such as gold and platinum, of which South Africa is a major producer. The current high price being fetched for gold means the mining companies are pushing for increased production.

Mining accounts for 7 percent of the country's gross domestic product and is the highest foreign exchange source. Mining exports in 2006 amounted to R355 billion (\$52 billion). Platinum prices on the world's stock exchanges peaked as a result of nervous reaction to the miners' one-day action.

After the Elandsrand case, the ANC government ordered a safety review of all mines, but no time limit was stipulated. The government is committed to free-market policies and has no intention of challenging the profits being made by the mining bosses. Whilst the NUM called the one-day strike, it does not seriously challenge the ANC government and has agreed to the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs in the mining industry since the end of apartheid. The NUM is a key union in the COSATU federation, which remains in coalition partnership with the ANC.

The miners' action is an expression of a broader combativeness amongst workers in South Africa in recent months, reflecting the growing disillusionment with the ANC government. About 40 percent of the population are unemployed, and over half are living below the poverty line, whilst a small black elite has enriched itself.



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