

Letter from a South African reader on the Marikana miners massacre

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The WSWS received the following letter from a reader in South Africa on Thursday's police massacre of striking miners Rustenburg's Marikana platinum mine.

Shortly before the police attack on striking mine workers at Rustenburg's Marikana platinum mine, police spokesperson Dennis Adriaio issued a chilling threat, a portent of the massacre to follow: "Today is unfortunately D-Day."

Following the police assault on the workers, reports of the death toll came filtering through; initially 12 dead were reported, then 18, then 25. Today the South African National Police Commissioner, Riah Phiyega, confirmed that 34 people had died in the hail of gunfire with 78 injured and a further 259 arrested. The COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) issued a statement reporting that 36 miners had been killed. Considering the number of injured and the severity of their injuries, the death toll is expected to rise.

In an attempt at damage control, Phiyega stated: "This is no time for finger-pointing. It is a time to mourn ..." adding that "[t]he police had to use force to protect themselves ..." When asked who gave the order to shoot, Phiyega stated: "As a commissioner, I gave police the responsibility to execute the task they needed to do." At the briefing, Phiyega aired a video showing two police officers being killed by a group of protesters in the days preceding the massacre.

The COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers, which, according to reports, enjoyed a "harmonious relationship" with management at the mine, defended the police action. Frans Baleni, the

secretary general of NUM, in an interview with a local radio station stated: "The police were patient, but these people were extremely armed with dangerous weapons." NUM also placed the blame for the massacre upon AMCU [Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union], which it alleged was formed by an NUM breakaway faction. NUM maintained that some of their members had been attacked by members of AMCU.

AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa hit back at NUM: "The National Union of Mineworkers is blaming everyone but themselves." He added that AMCU was a recognized trade union at Lonmin with 7,000 members. Nationally, it has a membership of 30,000. Mathunjwa maintained that the violence that preceded the massacre was not a result of union rivalry, but that NUM had "internal issues" which did not affect AMCU. The treasurer general of AMCU, Jimmy Gama, pointed to NUM as the instigator of violence at the mine: "What actually happened there is that on Friday there was a march of all the rock drill operators and during that march they were marching passing of the shaft called Wonderkop Mine and they saw some people coming from NUM offices wearing NUM T-shirts, shooting at the marchers and killing one employee there, so this whole violence started from that shooting."

The disaffection with NUM was evident in the days leading up to the massacre. NUM president Senzeni Zokwana attempted to address the miners from within the confines of a police armoured vehicle, imploring them to return to work. He was shouted down and forced to leave the area. The rock-drillers, who formed the majority of the protesters, said that they had decided to take action themselves after leaving the

union (NUM) to “negotiate our salary raise without any success for years”. Indeed, in 2010, when NUM vice-president Piet Mathosa tried to persuade his members at Lonmin to accept management’s wage offer, even though it fell far short of their demands, a rock was thrown at him, causing him to lose an eye. From the commencement of the strike, NUM repeatedly called on workers to return to work. They also dismissed the workers’ wage demand as unrealisable.

When the strike commenced, Lonmin issued a warning to workers to return to work within 24 hours or face dismissal. Management obtained a court order in an attempt to force workers back to work. Preceding this, in June, Lonmin had stated its intention to lay off 9,000 workers at its Marikana operation. A spokeswoman for Lonmin said only a “handful” of workers would not be affected.

Poverty wages, contemptuous treatment by management, the function of NUM as an appendage of management, and the imminent threat of job loss formed the backdrop to the murderous police attack on the miners.

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