

South African miners continue strike in aftermath of massacre

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South African platinum miners have continued their strike in the aftermath of the August 16 police massacre of 34 of their comrades in a hail of bullets that left another 78 wounded. Their anger is directed against not only mine-owner Lonmin and the police, but also the African National Congress (ANC) government and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

The 3,000 drilling operators at the Marikana mine, northwest of Johannesburg, are striking to demand a more than 300 percent increase in their 4,000 rand (\$480) minimum monthly wage to 12,500 rand (\$1,500).

The police and the ANC are acting as enforcers of the interests of the corporations. They are determined to make an example of a strike that gives expression to broad-based political and social discontent and challenges the South African bourgeoisie's brutal exploitation of the working class.

The mining industry epitomises how the ANC has presided over a widening of social inequality since the end of apartheid, enriching a venal layer of black capitalists that make up its leading personnel.

Platinum, extracted at a devastating cost to miners who live and work in appalling conditions, sells for over \$1,400 an ounce. Its price is rising as rival producers cash in on Lonmin's loss of six days of production, or about 15,000 ounces of platinum, worth over \$2,100,000. Lonmin shares have fallen by as much as 20 percent, wiping \$610 million off the market value of the world's third-largest platinum miner.

Lonmin has a record of frequent fatalities and "very poor" conditions for its employees, according to a Bench Marks Foundation report. The company has refused to comment on the report.

In the current dispute, the NUM is continuing its role as partner of the corporations, in this instance actively

assisting in the violent repression and persecution of the striking miners.

The strike is being led by the rival Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), which has won support due to the corruption of the NUM. Prior to last Thursday's massacre, ten people had already died in the dispute, including two police officers, two security guards and reportedly three NUM officials targeted as stooges of Lonmin.

Whereas the massacre was aimed at intimidating the strikers, all indications are that it has backfired. The miners remain resolute and determined. Winch operator Makhosi Mbongane told Associated Press, "They can beat us, kill us and kick and trample on us with their feet, do whatever they want to do. We aren't going to go back to work. If they employ other people, they won't be able to work either. We will stay here and kill them."

Last week's slaughter has repeatedly been compared to the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, which galvanised the mass movement against apartheid. Marikana could have a similar catalytic impact on the struggle that must now be waged against the ANC and its coalition partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) trade union federation and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The NUM has consistently backed the police attacks on the miners, including in the aftermath of the massacre. NUM Secretary General Frans Baleni reserved his bile for the AMCU and the miners, declaring, "You have opportunists who are abusing ignorant workers. We saw the results yesterday."

He said this as miners' loved-ones gathered at hospitals to find out whether their husbands, fathers and sons were among the wounded or the 256 arrested by the police and charged with public violence and, in

some cases, murder. No list of casualties was published.

A demonstration of miners' wives Friday featured placards reading, "Police Stop Shooting our Husbands and Sons."

National Police Chief Mangwashi Victoria Phiyega was appointed by President Jacob Zuma of the ANC in June and was previously in charge of preparing state-owned enterprises for privatisation. At a press conference, she blamed the strikers for instigating violence, claiming to have found six pistols, including two weapons taken from the police officers killed earlier.

She ignored video footage showing that the police shot miners without provocation as well as the report of the South African Institute of Race Relations, which stated: "There is clear evidence that policemen randomly shot into the crowd with rifles and handguns. There is also evidence of their continuing to shoot after a number of bodies can be seen dropping and others turning to run."

On Saturday, a mass rally of thousands of miners, their wives and families was addressed by Julius Malema, the former leader of the ANC's Youth League. Malema was expelled in April for leading an opposition faction.

Malema is a left-talking opportunist who specialises in nationalist and anti-capitalist rhetoric. However, his denunciations of President Zuma and UK-based Lonmin struck a chord with the crowd. Zuma must "step down," he said, adding that "President Zuma's government has murdered our people."

Malema pointed out that some ANC leaders had shares in the Lonmin PLC platinum mine and had no interest in defending miners. "It is not these brothers who are mourned by the president," he declared. "Instead he goes to meet capitalists in air-conditioned offices."

Zuma, returning from a summit in Mozambique, announced an official inquiry into the killings. This will undoubtedly be a whitewash. He and the ANC will have been intimately involved in the police killing, which was a calculated attempt to drown the strike in blood. Police officials referred to it as "D-Day" and said in advance that they would use "maximum force."

Zuma visited the mine Friday but did not even speak to the strikers. On Sunday, he declared a week of

national mourning in an attempt to defuse the situation while efforts are stepped up to drive the striking miners back to work. Zuma's announcement was preceded by a "final ultimatum" from Lonmin that all miners who failed to return to work would be dismissed.

Malema's role is to channel political discontent behind a wing of the South African bourgeoisie. His call for the nationalisation of the mining industry has evoked a powerful response, but he is just as much a representative of big business as Zuma. He has a record of involvement in state tenders that has led him to be called a "tenderpreneur." His disaffection with the ruling clique in the ANC is bound up with the failure of bids in which he was involved, including an attempt to acquire a stake in chrome miner ASA Metals in 2010.

The working class can place no confidence in any faction of the ANC, or in the trade union bureaucracy and the Stalinists. Eighteen years of bitter experience since the end of apartheid have demonstrated that their real allegiance is to the national bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations that continue to plunder South Africa.

The working class, mobilizing the rural poor, must build its own party to fight for the overthrow of capitalism and imperialist oppression in South Africa and throughout the continent.



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