

South African platinum miners' strike spreads

David Walsh
23 August 2012

The strike by thousands of South African platinum miners, which led to the police murder of 34 workers August 16 at Lonmin's Marikana mine, is spreading to other companies in the industry.

Rock drill operators walked out at the nearby Royal Bafokeng platinum mine Tuesday night, shutting down production at the site that employs 7,000 workers. No one reported for work at either of the mine's two shafts.

According to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), as reported in South Africa's *Business Day*, "the company had managed to get one shaft working on Wednesday morning, but the second shaft remained closed."

Company officials said they were "making every effort to understand the reasons for and to resolve this action." The rock drillers, who do difficult and dangerous work, are making similar demands to those at Lonmin, for an increase in their wages from 4,000 rand (US\$485) a month to 12,500 rand.

Royal Bafokeng CEO Steve Phiri told *Business Day* that the company had not responded to the wage demand since it had an existing collective agreement. Phiri added that "The NUM had demonstrated leadership by handling the situation and explaining to the rock drillers that management had referred them to the existing wage agreement and the company could not meet their demands."

Meanwhile, giant Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) reported that workers at its Thembelani mine near Rustenburg have given the company until Friday to respond to similar demands.

"Amplats spokeswoman Mpumi Sithole said yesterday the demands were presented after a march last week—by the workers, and not union representatives," wrote *Business Day*.

At the Marikana mine, the site of the massacre, 70 miles northwest of Johannesburg, the overwhelming majority of

workers remain on strike, in defiance of earlier company ultimatums. Lonmin claimed that 33 percent of employees showed up Tuesday, but no production took place.

The company, formerly known as Lonrho and headed by the notorious "Tiny" Rowland (in 1973 British Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath called Lonrho the "unpleasant and unacceptable face of capitalism"), had insisted at first that workers return to the mine this week or face dismissal.

The African National Congress (ANC) government of Jacob Zuma intervened, concerned by the impact of the company's provocation, and the mining firm promised no reprisals against miners who stayed off the job during the national days of mourning.

The 259 miners arrested in connection with the Lonmin strike, which began August 10, remain behind bars, some of them facing murder and attempted murder charges. The jailed men appeared in court for the first time August 21, under heavy police guard. Protesters, including wives and other relatives, were removed from the Garankuwa Magistrate's Court, north of Pretoria, and forced into the street by police.

The prosecution requested a one-week postponement to allow time to complete their investigation. No police officers or officials face charges for the cold-blooded murders August 16. A promised government inquiry will be a whitewash.

The striking Lonmin miners are insisting on the release of the imprisoned workers as part of their demands. At negotiations late Tuesday between Lonmin and the strikers, the first such talks since the strike began, brokered by Anglican Bishop Johannes Seoka, rock driller Kwenene Msindiseni told the media, "We want our brothers who (were) arrested to be freed, without bail. They must attend the memorial service" on Thursday.

ANC government officials have been greeted with anger by miners and residents in the platinum mining region.

Defense and Military Veterans Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, part of a ministerial delegation, was heckled by miners when she attempted to apologize for the massacre on Tuesday in Marikana.

The Associated Press (AP) reported, “The minister spoke after one furious miner demanded to know why President Jacob Zuma has not come to address them, and threatened not to vote for the governing African National Congress.”

The South African Press Association (SAPA) noted that when Mapisa-Nqakula told the crowd that the cabinet ministers were there to comfort the bereaved families and to help them with funerals, “The crowd interrupted her, telling her not to repeat what they had already heard. They accused President Jacob Zuma of neglecting them.”

SAPA explained that when the ANC delegation arrived, “workers demanded that the police, stationed about 200 metres away, should move or they would boycott the meeting. ‘We do not feel safe near the police. Ask them to leave or you leave,’ [one of the strikers’ leaders, Xolani] Nzuza said.”

The defense minister apologized on behalf of the government, telling the miners, “I am begging, I beg and I apologize, may you find forgiveness in your hearts.”

On Wednesday, President Zuma spoke to a crowd of miners and residents in Marikana, six days after the mass killing. According to AP, “What has happened is very painful. We cry with you, all of us,” Zuma told the miners. However, “There was none of the usual applause or ululating that normally greets Zuma. The hundreds of miners and community members were near-sullen.”

When Zuma claimed he had come to the Lonmin mine the day after the massacre, some in the crowd shouted, “You’re lying!” The president refused a request Wednesday by strikers to visit the site of the August 16 killings, which the “miners are sanctifying like the scene of a martyr’s death,” wrote AP, “When the presidential cavalcade left, workers followed its clouds of dust, expecting Zuma to stop at the site where hundreds more miners had gathered. But the convoy just drove past.”

AP observed that protests in South Africa against shortages of housing, electricity and running water, as well as poor education and health services, are “an almost daily affair.” It continued, “That poverty is contrasted by the ostentatious lifestyles of a small elite of blacks who have become multimillionaires, often through corruption related to government tenders.”

Business information provider WealthInsight recently reported that the number of Ultra High Net Worth

Individuals (those with wealth of US\$30 million or more) in South Africa increased by 20 percent between 2007 and 2011. Those 543 individuals have an average wealth of US\$132 million per person and a total wealth of US\$72 billion.

The spread of the platinum strike in the wake of the Marikana massacre is causing considerable anxiety throughout the South African establishment and mining industry. Industry media outlet mineweb.com termed the report from Anglo American Platinum of “an unspecified pay increase demand from workers on the world’s largest platinum mine ... a possibly ominous development.”

Mineweb points out that the demand at Amplats “has come from workers directly, rather than through official National Union of Mineworkers (the principal mining union at the mines) channels, and this mirrors the demands at Lonmin’s Marikana mine where again no official demands were made to the mine owners via the union.”

The web site continues: “What is particularly worrying here is that the miners are bypassing the NUM suggesting a total lack of trust in the traditional mining union setup. The NUM appears to be being seen as a vassal of the ruling African National Congress political party—i.e., part of the new South African establishment.”

The breakaway from the NUM, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), which has played a leading role in the Lonmin strike, is apparently not a significant factor at Anglo American or Royal Bafokeng.

Reuters reported Wednesday that “AMCU president Joseph Mathunjwa told a news briefing in Rustenburg that reports of disturbances at Royal Bafokeng Platinum (RBPlat) and wage demands at Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) had nothing to do with his union.” Revealing his own outlook, Mathunjwa, when asked if he thought the mine unrest would spread, replied, “I do not want to be a prophet of doom.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact