

South Africa's day of mourning fails to stem anger over Marikana massacre

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Anger continues to mount over the August 16 massacre of 34 striking miners at South Africa's Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana despite official efforts to lower tensions.

Thursday's national day of mourning called by President Jacob Zuma of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) made clear that professions of sorrow will not suffice to dissipate the outrage directed against not only the mining companies, but also the ANC and its allies in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party.

At the main commemoration at the Marikana mine northwest of Johannesburg, sobbing widows of the murdered workers were joined by more than 1,000 people, among them the relatives of 259 strikers currently being held in prison.

Earlier, Impala Rustenburg, the world's largest platinum mine, announced that all production had ceased for the day to allow workers to pay their respects to their Lonmin colleagues. Impala Rustenburg was the scene of a bitter six-week strike earlier this year that left four workers dead.

Such is the hostility directed against Zuma that he was unable to attend any of the ceremonies. Police kept a low profile, although hundreds of officers were gathered in the backstreets.

Government officials, church leaders and trade union officials had agreed that no political speeches would be allowed. But the combative mood among miners found expression in the service, as an unidentified man took to the stage to demand Zuma's resignation before the microphone was seized from him.

Later, at the close of the ceremony, expelled ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema was applauded when he attacked the ANC's collusion with the mining companies, stating, "Our government has become a pig

that is eating its children". A former Zuma stalwart, Malema was expelled from the ANC in February on charges of "sowing disunity". A dozen ANC government ministers walked out of the ceremony during his speech.

More than a week after the massacre, less than a third of employees have returned to work at Lonmin, with many vowing to fight to the bitter end. Most of the rock drillers that led the walkout are migrants. They work in extremely hazardous conditions for just \$500 a month and are housed in squalid camps. Many have left the NUM, which is rightly regarded to be in league with the mine bosses, and joined the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

Even as the government attempted to calm tensions, other platinum operators were warning of unrest spreading. Earlier in the week, miners at Royal Bafokeng Platinum demanded pay increases, while workers at Anglo American Platinum in Rustenburg bypassed the unions to submit a list of demands to management for settlement by Friday.

On Friday morning, more than 100 workers at Anglo American defied orders to return to work after receiving no response to their grievances. Work was resumed only after the company began talks with representatives selected by the miners.

Fears within the ruling elite of a growing rebellion by workers against not only the employers, but also COSATU, were summed up by the South African business web site *Moneyweb*, which asked, "Is Lonmin only the beginning?"

Reporting a steady escalation in violent strikes over the last two years, *Moneyweb* cited the statement of the South African Special Risks Insurance Association that "strike-related claims have increased significantly since 2006" and now "account for over 70 percent of SASRIA claims."

The slaying of striking workers is proof that nothing has

changed fundamentally for the broad mass of black workers in South Africa since the end of apartheid nearly two decades ago. A black elite from the ANC and COSATU have become fabulously wealthy under the banner of “black empowerment”. NUM founder Cyril Ramaphosa, a multi-millionaire, sits on the board of Lonmin, while the country’s police force is overseen by black commissioner Riah Phiyega, who defended the massacre.

The case of Aurora Empowerment Systems is another example. A partnership between Nelson Mandela’s grandson, Zondwa Mandela, and one of Zuma’s nephews, Khulubuse Zuma, it had been granted rights to take over two bankrupt gold mines outside Johannesburg in 2009. It was quickly mired in allegations of irregularities and asset stripping, and accused of failing to pay workers for 18 months, leaving them abandoned in barracks without electricity and dependent on food handouts.

Claude Baissac, managing director of mining consultancy Eunomix, warned, “It is not incidental that the challenge to the historically dominant union NUM, affiliated with the ANC, is taking place within a context of growing grass-root contestation to the performance of government.”

According to a study by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, there has been an upsurge of violent protests since 2009 in impoverished areas over the lack of basic amenities and official indifference. The report was published last year, the same year that South Africa officially displaced Brazil as the most socially unequal country in the world. Half the population live below the poverty line, with unemployment officially at 25 percent.

The Judicial Commission of Inquiry announced by Zuma is aimed at whitewashing the Lonmin massacre and conditions in the industry more broadly, while trying to reassure investors that South Africa is safe for exploitation. Former judge Ian Farlam is to head the three-person commission, which will take five months to report.

It will inevitably be used to sanction further repressive measures against workers. Zuma has said it will examine the government, police, unions, and individuals to determine whether the use of force “was reasonable and justifiable in the particular circumstances.”

Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa has announced an investigation into “the suspected political manipulation of mineworkers”, while COSATU claimed to have identified a “coordinated political strategy” to use intimidation and violence to encourage workers to break with the NUM.

The charge is that AMCU is working with Malema to undermine the ANC and COSATU. The ANC and COSATU are working with the mining companies on this witch-hunt.

Malema does not offer a viable alternative to the ANC and its allies. Defending his high-profile interventions over the last week, Malema made a highly revealing statement.

“There was a political vacuum and we occupied that space,” he said. “If we failed to do that, the wrong elements would have taken that space. We took it while the [ANC] leadership was indoors speaking to themselves.”

His role is to utilise radical rhetoric to dragoon disaffected sections of workers behind the expelled faction of the ANC he heads and deliver them once again to be exploited by the global corporations in alliance with the black bourgeoisie.

Accompanying the threats against the AMCU is a parallel campaign to bring the breakaway union on board. Meetings were due between the union and the labour minister as well as the Chamber of Mines, while Impala Platinum (Implats) has said it will begin verifying union membership at its mines to determine whether AMCU should be recognised in place of or alongside the NUM. Implats CEO Terence Goodlace said that progress was being made despite the fact that “a lot of these people are not as experienced as NUM.”

Such efforts notwithstanding, grave warnings are being made regarding the broader implications of the events in Marikana. Elizabeth Stephens, head of political risk analysis for the insurers JLT, said these developments were “indicative of wider economic and political tensions across Africa.”

She continued: “A wave of strikes has been seen in key African mining countries in recent months, and in most cases recent strikers have been successful in securing pay increases, arguably giving mining workers the confidence to go on strike over issues such as pay.”



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