

South Africa's mine massacre

Bill Van Auken
18 August 2012

The massacre of striking platinum miners in South Africa Thursday has laid bare the irreconcilable conflict between the working class on the one hand and the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the trade unions allied to it on the other.

Officials have placed the death toll in the barbaric police slaughter at 34, but other sources have suggested that the real number could be closer to 50. Scores more were wounded, some of them critically, in the barrage of automatic weapons fire unleashed against miners carrying machetes and sticks. Police have arrested 259 miners. Families continue to search for missing fathers, brothers and sons at hospitals, morgues and police stations.

The scene of a phalanx of police firing assault rifles into virtually defenseless workers and then advancing on a dusty field littered with bleeding corpses and the moaning wounded has shocked the conscience of South Africa and recalled the horrific repression carried out under apartheid rule in similar mass killings at Sharpeville in 1960 and Soweto in 1976.

The most evident difference is that this time the slaughter was organized not by a white minority regime that became an international pariah, but rather by a government run by its former antagonist, the African National Congress (ANC), which has ruled the country for 18 years, proclaiming its government the realization of the struggle for liberation and the guardian of equality.

In reality, while statutory racial apartheid has been abolished, economic inequality has grown even worse than under white minority rule. The chasm separating South Africa's wealthy ruling elite—whose ranks now include black multi-millionaire former ANC officials, trade union leaders and politically connected businessmen—and the masses of workers and poor is wider in South Africa than in any other country in the world, with the sole exception of Namibia.

The *Sowetan* newspaper accurately observed in a front-page editorial Friday that the massacre had served “to awaken us to the reality of the time bomb that has stopped ticking—it has exploded!”

In the final analysis, this explosion has been triggered by the world crisis of capitalism, whose impact upon the South African economy and the mining sector, in particular, has led to an upsurge in the class struggle in this country, just as it has in the Middle East, Europe and throughout the world.

Political analysts have attempted to reduce the bloody events to a turf battle between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)—the 300,000-member union that is the heart of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) union federation, which is, in turn, in political alliance with the ANC—and a more militant independent union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

The AMCU has grown thanks to the miners' rising anger at the corruption and self-enrichment of the NUM officialdom—personified in the figure of Cyril Ramaphosa, the former NUM president who has become one of South Africa's richest millionaires, with a significant personal stake in the mining sector and a seat on the board of directors of the London-based Lonmin corporation, the owner of the mine where the massacre took place. His fortune has been gained by services rendered in the subordination of the miners' interests to the demands of the government and the transnational mining companies that it serves.

Reports from the scene of the massacre, however, indicate that the upstart union was itself unable to contain the militancy of the strikers.

Those who walked out of Lonmin's platinum mine a week ago are among the most exploited workers on the planet—rock-drill operators who labor deep underground in unimaginably harsh and dangerous conditions for roughly \$500 a month. Many are migrant

workers from countries like Mozambique and Swaziland, sending the bulk of their pay home to support extended families and living in shacks without electricity or running water.

The 3,000 miners who had gathered on a hillside overlooking Lonmin's Marikana mine first drove away the NUM president, who tried to address them from inside a police armored car, and then rejected an appeal to disperse by the president of the AMCU, saying that they would rather die than return to work under existing conditions.

The police were sent precisely with the mission of gunning down these workers. Police officials referred to their mission as "D-Day," vowing to use "maximum force." As the reporter for Johannesburg's daily *Star*, Poloko Tau, wrote Friday, "It was a well-planned attack that turned a protest into a kill zone."

After dispersing the crowd with tear gas, water cannon and stun grenades and chasing miners on horseback and in armored cars, a section of the workers were herded into a waiting line of police armed with automatic weapons and live ammunition. The aim of this bloodletting was to quell the growing militancy of the workers and defend the loosening grip of the pro-government unions.

The leaders of these unions, together with the other partner in the ANC's tripartite alliance, the Stalinist South African Communist Party, have played the most despicable role. They have defended the police murderers and demanded the suppression of the striking miners, whom they refer to as "criminals," as well as the arrest and punishment of their "ring leaders."

The bloodletting at the Marikana mine signals a turning point in South African history. It is by no means an isolated event, but part of a growing eruption of struggles of the South African workers and oppressed, who today confront an official unemployment rate of 25 percent and conditions of life in the impoverished townships that are little changed from the misery that existed under apartheid.

The calculated state murder of South African miners must be taken as a warning to the international working class. It is indicative of the methods that will be increasingly employed in the face of mounting working class opposition to brutal austerity measures and attacks on workers' rights in every country. No one with a knowledge of the history of the struggles of workers in

the US can doubt that the response of the American ruling class to mass social opposition will be no different from that of its South African counterpart.

The developments in South Africa have provided the starkest confirmation of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which established that in the oppressed countries, the bourgeois nationalist movements, tied to capitalism and fearful of the working class, are organically incapable of carrying through the struggle for democracy and liberation from imperialist domination, much less meeting the social aspirations of the workers and oppressed masses.

These tasks fall to the working class, mobilizing behind itself all of the oppressed social layers. Their realization requires a decisive political break with the ANC and its trade union apparatus and the building of a new independent leadership based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. It means fighting for a workers' government to nationalize the mines and other key sectors of the economy and carry out a radical redistribution of wealth, while seeking to extend the revolution throughout the African continent and beyond. The fight for this perspective requires the building of a South African section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact