

The unions, the pseudo-left and the South Africa massacre

Joseph Kishore
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The massacre of 34 striking workers at Lonmin's Marikana mine in South Africa has cast into sharp relief the role of the official trade unions, in South Africa and internationally, amid a global upsurge of the class struggle.

A river of blood now separates the miners from the National Union of Mineworkers—the central component of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which is closely aligned with the African National Congress (ANC) government. The NUM has revealed itself as a tool of state repression and murder.

The eruption of working class anger against the giant mine owners has put workers in direct conflict with the organizations that supposedly represent them. After the massacre, NUM General Secretary Frans Baleni demanded that “all workers to go back to work and for the law enforcement agencies to crack down on the culprits of the violence and murders”—which, according to the NUM, are the workers themselves.

The conflict between the working class and the NUM does not stop at Marikana. The mining industry site mineweb.com wrote recently, “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.”

This alignment of forces—in which the unions fall in behind the corporations and the government—is international in scope. So too is the growing rebellion of workers against these right-wing, pro-corporate institutions, as the ruling class carries out an international program of social counter-revolution.

In Europe, wherever struggles have escaped from the confines of actions officially sanctioned by the unions,

the unions have collaborated with the government in repressing them. During the strike of Spanish air traffic controllers in 2010, the government called out the military to break the strike, with the support of the unions and their political allies.

In the United States, a series of significant struggles have erupted over the past two years in opposition to the AFL-CIO, as workers have sought to fight the corporate attack on jobs and benefits now spearheaded by the Obama administration.

In 2010, workers in Indianapolis, Indiana overwhelmingly rejected a 50 percent wage cut backed by the United Auto Workers, driving out union executives from a local meeting. A section of workers formed an independent rank-and-file committee to organize a fight to defend jobs and wages. A few months before, auto workers erupted in a near-riot against UAW officials supporting the closure of the NUMMI plant in Fremont, California.

Just last week, workers at the Chrysler Dundee Engine plant in Michigan, angered by forced overtime and two-tier wages, voted overwhelmingly against a local contract, to the surprise and anger of management and the UAW. Where struggles have broken out under union control—as in the strike of Caterpillar workers in Joliet, Illinois—workers quickly came up against the fact that the union works for their isolation and defeat.

These events powerfully confirm the analysis made by the International Committee of the Fourth International of the nature of the trade unions. In 1993, the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, explained that the degeneration of the trade unions was rooted in their nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective, which was undermined by the globalization of production and the breakdown of the post-war social order: “The role of these bureaucratic

apparatuses in every country has been transformed from pressuring the employers and the state for concessions to the workers, to pressuring the workers for concessions to the employers so as to attract capital.”

At Marikana, the unions have moved from pressuring workers to open, violent repression. When circumstances require it, they will act the same way in Europe, the United States and beyond.

Workers’ efforts to break free of these institutions provoke the outrage not only of the corporate elite, but also of middle class organizations that posture as “left” or even socialist.

Typical is an article on the South Africa massacre published on August 21—after four days of silence—by the International Socialist Organization in the US. After cynically feigning sympathy with the workers and criticizing the NUM, the ISO makes clear that it is adamantly opposed to any attempt to break the stranglehold of this institution. The ISO even criticizes the NUM’s rival union, the more militant Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

“Without a doubt, the mining bosses are overjoyed at the sharpening discord between different wings of South Africa’s labor movement,” the ISO writes. “And at times, AMCU leaders have been drawn into maneuvers that exacerbate the divisiveness that the mine bosses have hoped to foment.”

In fact, the mine companies are not “overjoyed” by “sharpening discord” between the unions, but desperately afraid that their NUM allies will lose control over the workers. The ISO makes clear that it too is determined to prevent “divisiveness”—i.e., working class opposition to the NUM.

A companion article, reprinted by the ISO from the South African journal *Amandla!*, denounces the AMCU for advancing “unrealistic demands” and “failing to condemn the violence of its members.” That is, the workers are themselves to blame for their deaths because they have the temerity to desire a decent wage.

Amandla!, closely aligned with the Democratic Left Front of South Africa, writes elsewhere that the “union’s role, once wage negotiations are complete, is to transmit the decision to the rest of the workforce.” And workers are supposed to accept this “transmission” without complaint.

The ISO and its international co-thinkers speak for

privileged, complacent and reactionary sections of the upper middle class. For them, the unions are both a source of potentially lucrative careers and a mechanism to maintain organizational and political control over the working class—and thereby prevent any struggle against capitalism.

Whatever the hopes of the trade union executives and their allies, however, the objective crisis is driving millions of people along a different path—towards the formation of new organizations of struggle and towards socialist politics. The bloody events in South Africa have exposed the class lines, and they must become a strategic experience for the entire international working class.

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