South African police massacre striking miners

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South African police opened fire with automatic weapons on striking platinum miners in the country's North West province on Thursday, killing at least 30.

Other reports cite a death toll as high as 40.

Corpses were strewn on the ground after a three-minute hail of gunfire. Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa told the media, "A lot of people were injured and the number keeps on going up."

The mass killing came on the sixth day of a strike by miners at Marikana operations of the British-owned Lonmin Plc, the world's third-largest platinum mining company. Thousands of rock drillers walked out of the mines last Friday to press their demand for a doubling of salaries. The platinum mines are among the lowest paying in South Africa, and miners charge that little has changed in their conditions since the end of apartheid nearly two decades ago.

Lonmin had ratcheted up tensions in the dispute by issuing an ultimatum that any miners failing to report to work today would be fired. The South African police, meanwhile, vowed before the massacre that they would put an end to the workers' struggle. South African Police Service Provincial Police Commissioner Zukiswa Mbombo told the media Thursday morning, "our intention is to make sure that people leave that illegal gathering area where they are and that is what we will do today … today we are ending this matter."

Before gunning down the striking miners, some 3,000 of whom had gathered on a hill overlooking the mine, police tried to drive them off, encircling them with razor wire and using tear gas, stun grenades and water cannon. It was in the confusion created by these attacks that a column of miners carrying machetes and sticks approached a line of police armed with automatic weapons. Video of the confrontation shows the police machine-gunning the defenseless workers.

The savage repression, which has drawn widespread comparisons to the massacres by the apartheid regime in Sharpeville in 1960 and Soweto in 1976, was carried out with the full backing of the African National Congress (ANC) government and its most important union supporter, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which has worked with management and the government to break the strike.

Underlying the conflict is the challenge to the NUM posed by a breakaway union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), which has organized a substantial section of workers who are disaffected with the NUM over its subordination of the miners' interests to those of the mine owners and the ANC government.

According to some estimates, the AMCU has the support of a third of the miners at Lonmin's Marikana mine, while the NUM has the support of another third, while the rest have chosen not to affiliate with either union. In the days leading up to the massacre, 10 people were killed in violence that pitted supporters of the two unions against each other, as well as in clashes with police.

Both the NUM and the ANC government rushed to justify the slaughter at Marikana, even as masses of South Africans reacted with shock to the bloodletting.

NUM spokesman Lesiba Seshoka told the media, "The police cannot just watch as our country is held to ransom by criminals." Miners reported that NUM officials were working directly with the police in organizing the repression, traveling together with them in armored Caspir vehicles.

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South African President Jacob Zuma of the ANC declared himself "shocked and dismayed by this senseless violence." He quickly added, however, "I have instructed law enforcement agencies to do everything possible to bring the situation under control and to bring the perpetrators of violence to book." Clearly the "perpetrators" he had in mind were not the murderous police, but their victims among the striking miners.

The NUM and the trade union federation of which it is a part, COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), are a pillar of support for the ANC government, which in turn defends the interests of the mining corporations and other sections of foreign and domestic capital.

Rival upstart unions like the AMCU and the Professional Transport & Allied Workers Union (PTAWU) have grown at the NUM's and COSATU's expense out of the growing frustration and anger of South African workers over the complete integration of the union leadership into the government and the corporations.

These relationships are personified in the figure of the former NUM leader Cyril Ramaphosa, one of the major beneficiaries of the policy of "black empowerment" that followed the fall of apartheid. He and others joined corporate boards, grabbed government contracts and amassed fortunes. Now one of South Africa's richest men, Ramaphosa's personal fortune was estimated last year at over $275 million, a large share of it in mining interests.

The AMCU had won enough support at the Lonmin mine to receive the company's recognition as a union. At the Rustenburg operations of the world's second-largest platinum producer, Impala, it claims to represent over half of the 20,000 workers and the company is conducting an independent audit to determine which union should act as the bargaining agent.

These defections from the ANC-affiliated unions are symptomatic of growing unrest within the working class as a whole and intense resentment over the levels of social inequality in South Africa, which are among the highest anywhere in the world. Increasingly, workers' ire is turned toward the ANC and the class of black capitalists it has spawned at the expense of the masses of working people.

The unrest in the mining areas has been accompanied by growing protests within the poorer urban neighborhoods over the government's failure to deliver adequate services in terms of housing, electricity, water and sanitation.

At least four people have been killed in protests that have gripped western Cape Town over the past week and a half. The unrest has seen the stoning of trains, vehicles and police stations, as well as roads blocked with burning tires as workers and youth have taken to the streets to protest against inadequate housing, deteriorating infrastructure, and poor public services.

Unrest has been fanned by the impact of the world capitalist crisis upon South Africa, whose economy is heavily dependent upon crisis-stricken Europe. The official unemployment rate stands at 25 percent, while many say that a real figure would be closer to 40 percent. Growth forecasts for this year have been slashed to 2.7 percent. Analysts warn that at least 7 percent is required to begin to address the unemployment crisis, however.

Meanwhile, South Africa's richest 100 individuals saw their net worth rise by 62 percent last year, even as more than half of the country's 50 million people fell below the official poverty line.

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