

South African miners defiant in face of government, company threats

Bill Van Auken
21 August 2012

Four days after 34 of their comrades were massacred by heavily armed police, striking South African platinum miners defied a company ultimatum to return to work Monday or be fired.

Stating that barely 27 percent of the workforce had reported to the Marikana mine on Monday, the mine's owner, London-based mining conglomerate Lonmin, was forced to back off of its threat. It issued a statement saying that no one would be fired for not having gone back into the mine and set a new deadline of Tuesday morning.

The mine was unable to resume any production Monday, as rock drill operators, some 3,000 of whom have been on strike since August 10, refused to end their action. These workers, among the most brutally exploited in South Africa, are indispensable for digging new platinum out of the ground.

Thousands of strikers returned to the hill overlooking the mine where the massacre took place on Monday. The area remains a "bloody battlefield," according to a report published Monday in the South African *Mail & Guardian*.

"Bloodied pieces of clothing littered the ground and surrounding bushes, while fresh yellow paint marked the areas where dead bodies were strewn," the newspaper reported. An empty teargas canister was discarded close to one of the yellow paint markings, and nearby a spent flare was played with by a group of children."

It was here last Thursday that an army of police backed by helicopters and armored vehicles used tear gas, water cannon and stun grenades to disperse the strikers, driving one group into a waiting phalanx of cops armed with automatic weapons and live ammunition. Sustained and random gunfire continued even after scores of the strikers fell dead and wounded in scenes that called to mind the historic massacres perpetrated by the former apartheid regime in Sharpeville and Soweto.

Workers who spoke to South African media were clearly angry and bitter at both the African National Congress government for organizing this bloodletting and the company, Lonmin, for treating their demands with contempt and ordering them to end their strike or lose their jobs, under conditions where the blood of their co-workers is still not dry.

"Expecting us to go back is like an insult. Many of our friends and colleagues are dead, then they expect us to resume

work. Never," Zachariah Mbewu, one of the strikers, told the South African Press Association (SAPA). "Some are in prison and hospitals. The worker added, "We are going back to the mountain, not underground, unless management gives us what we want."

"Are they also going to fire the ones who are in hospitals and lying in mortuaries?" asked another striker, Thapelo Modima. "It is better to be fired anyway because we are suffering, our lives won't change. Lonmin does not care about our well-being. They have so far refused to hear us out, only sending police to kill us."

Yandisa Matomela, who does casual labor at nearby mines and joined the rock drill operators' struggle, told the *Mail & Guardian*: "The government is under the ANC so it's the ANC that killed those people. They don't care about us. Government is looking after the mine, that's why the police are here. More people will die but nothing will happen."

While South African President Jacob Zuma declared a week of national mourning, the actions of the ANC government have made it abundantly clear that it and its key allies, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) union federation, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Stalinists of the South African Communist Party, stand fully behind the massacre.

In announcing the period of mourning, Zuma declared: "We must avoid finger-pointing and recrimination. We must unite against violence from whatever quarter. We must reaffirm our belief in peace, stability and order and in building a caring society free of crime and violence."

Of course, the "violence" he was speaking of was not the bloody repression carried out by his own security forces, but the actions of workers, not only the platinum miners, but also impoverished township residents who have carried out militant protests over their abysmal living conditions. As for "finger-pointing," the ANC government is going much further than that, scapegoating and persecuting the victims of the massacre while defending those who carried it out.

The *Sowetan* newspaper Monday quoted Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega, a former banker who has been in her post for only about two months, as telling police that they shouldn't worry about the mass killings in Marikana. "Safety

of the public is not negotiable,” she said. “Don’t be sorry about what happened.”

Meanwhile, the government has made it clear it will show no mercy to 260 strikers arrested on the day of the massacre. They were brought aboard police buses, escorted by armored cars, to a court in the Pretoria township of Ga-Rankuwa on Monday morning under conditions that resembled a state of siege.

Police drove over 100 supporters of the miners out of the courthouse and into the street before the workers were brought in on the buses, from which they could be heard singing. The supporters, many of them women still trying to locate missing husbands and sons, held placards with slogans such as “Free the innocent workers.” Some fell to the street weeping as the column bearing the prisoners passed.

“Police officers holding shields formed a barricade at the court entrance,” the SAPA news agency reported. “The first lot of the mineworkers, walking in single file, filled the left side of the courtroom benches, which had been reserved for them. Some of them held hands. There were bloodstains on some of their clothes.”

Defense lawyers pointed out that the miners, who are being charged with crimes ranging from murder to public violence and robbery, had not been brought before a judge within 48 hours of their arrest, as required under South African law. The prosecution argued against letting the miners, some of them immigrants from neighboring African countries, free on bail, insisting that they had no known addresses. The defense countered that the shacks in which the workers sleep between their shifts are addresses and that they deserved the right to bail. The workers were sent back to prison, with the judge granting a seven-day postponement for further investigation and still more charges to be brought.

The government also announced the formation of a “task force” to investigate the issues that led up to the massacre. It is to include Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu, Labor Minister Mildred Oliphant, the Chamber of Mines and other big business representatives, and the National Union of Mineworkers, whose leadership has been attempting from the outset to break the strike.

Excluded from these deliberations is the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), the union that represents the striking rock drill operators, and which has been vilified by the NUM for opposing the larger ANC affiliated union’s collaboration with the mine bosses and the government.

The NUM has publicly denounced the strikers as “criminals” and the AMCU as “anarchists” and “ringleaders” who should be jailed and punished.

Together with the South African Communist Party (SACP), which along with COSATU is part of the tripartite alliance that is the political foundation of ANC rule, these union officials have played the most criminal role in justifying the massacre and denouncing its victims.

NUM General Secretary Frans Baleni issued a videotaped statement on the union’s web site Monday warning against “those dark forces who mislead our members, make them to believe that they’ve got extra power to make their life to be different overnight,” referring to the AMCU and other more militant unions.

COSATU said it “reiterates its call for workers to observe maximum discipline and unity in the face of a ruthless attempt to divide and weaken them” and declared its “full support” for the NUM’s “efforts to resolve the situation.” These efforts consisted of justifying the massacre in advance and then sending the NUM president to address the strikers over a bullhorn from the inside of a police armored car, demanding that they disperse. He was driven off by the workers.

The foulest reaction has been that of the Stalinists of the SACP, who have openly defended the massacre. The SACP in the North West province, where the slaughter took place, accused the leaders of the striking workers—not the police—of carrying out a “barbaric act” and demanded their arrest.

SACP official Dominic Tweedie was quoted as saying: “This was no massacre, this was a battle. The police used their weapons in exactly the way they were supposed to. That’s what they have them for. The people they shot didn’t look like workers to me. We should be happy. The police were admirable.”

In its official statement issued on August 19, the SACP called for a commission of inquiry being set up by President Zuma to turn its attention not to the lethal violence of the police, but to “the pattern of violence associated with the pseudo-trade union AMCU” and urged it to specifically investigate its president, Joseph Mathunjwa. Describing those who opposed the domination of the NUM as “demagogic” and “anarchic,” it claimed that the rival union was a creation of the mining companies.

These vicious attacks are a measure of the crisis within the ruling ANC and its cohorts in the NUM-COSATU union apparatus as well the Stalinist SACP. This crisis is driven by the growing militancy of the working class and its resistance to the attempt by these forces to subordinate its interests to the government and the transnational corporations and domestic capitalists that it represents.

The massacre at Marikana has served both to shock popular consciousness in South Africa and severely discredit this reactionary political alliance, together with the corrupt layer of ex-union officials and ANC politicians turned millionaires that it has spawned.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact