

Funerals of slain South African miners held as unrest spreads

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Burials for most of the 34 platinum miners massacred by police on August 16 took place Saturday.

The killings at the Marikana mine, near Johannesburg, were an attempt to crush a strike by rock drillers, employed by UK-based Lonmin, against hazardous and backbreaking conditions on pay of just \$500 per month.

The police injured over 70 other workers, in an event recalling the brutality routinely meted out by the former white *apartheid* regime. That such methods are now been employed under the African National Congress government—which preaches “black empowerment”—has caused widespread anger.

Many of those murdered came from the Eastern Cape. In one village, funerals were held for striker Phumzile Sokhanyile and his mother, Glorious Mamkhuzeni-Sokhanyi, who collapsed and died when she heard how her son had been killed.

Despite government-brokered talks between Lonmin, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and workers’ representatives, the strike is continuing. The inclusion of the NUM in talks is tantamount to a provocation, given that it has denounced the strike and supported police repression.

Management said less than 6 percent of its 28,000 employees reported for work Friday, down from 30 percent at the time of the massacre.

Labour unrest has also spread to the gold mines. On Wednesday, a quarter of the 46,000 strong workforce at Gold Fields—the world’s fourth-largest gold mine—walked out at the KDC mine, west of Johannesburg. KDC operates eight mines in South Africa, Australia, Ghana and Peru. Gold Fields is its largest operation in South Africa.

In a statement, the company wrote: “Employees of the East Section of the KDC Gold Mine on the West Rand (Johannesburg) in South Africa have been engaging in an unlawful and unprotected strike since the start of the night shift on Wednesday.”

The Marikana massacre and spreading strike action have staggered the South African government.

South African prosecutors withdrew bogus murder charges yesterday against 270 platinum miners from Marikana. Last week, the National Prosecution Authority (NPA) had announced that the miners were being charged with the murder of their 34 colleagues killed by police under the apartheid-era “common purpose” law. Earlier yesterday morning, moreover, President Jacob Zuma had said he would not intervene to help the miners.

Despite the NPA’s announcement, the miners are still imprisoned, though they are supposed to be released this week.

The state has also left open the possibility of reinstating the charges. Nomgcobo Jiba, the acting National Director of Prosecutions, told a televised news conference: “Final charges will only be made once all investigations have been completed. The murder charges against the current 270 suspects will be formally withdrawn provisionally in court.”

The NPA’s withdrawal of the charges was forced on the authorities by rising public outrage and opposition in the working class.

In a letter to the president, the miners’ lawyers said the charges were “bizarre in the extreme ... It is inconceivable that (you) can genuinely believe or even suspect that our clients murdered their own colleagues and in some cases, their own relatives,” the letter said.

Leaked post-mortem reports indicate that many of those slain were shot in the back as they tried to escape a murderous police onslaught.

An account by Pulitzer prize-winning photographer Greg Marinovich, at the scene of the massacre on Wonderkop Hill, said that some had been shot at close range or killed by heavy police vehicles. Based on survivors' eyewitness accounts, Marinovich said many had been killed out of camera sight. Trapped by police lines, they were gunned down or run over.

The account is supported by research conducted by Peter Alexander, professor of sociology at the University of Johannesburg, and others who also interviewed witnesses.

Responding to the public outcry over the murder charges, Justice Minister Jeffrey Radebe, complained they had "induced a sense of shock, panic and confusion within the members of the community and the general South African public."

Commenting on Radebe's criticism, Ralph Mathekga, the BBC's South African political analyst, said he believed it was "merely a façade to create the impression that the NPA's decision has been made independently and the government did not play a role."

Citing previous indications of government "meddling" in the judicial process, like the NPA's decision to drop corruption charges against Zuma in 2009, Mathekga wrote: "[I]n the eyes of ordinary South Africans, the government is trying to appease foreign investors at the expense of aggrieved Lonmin miners, who are suffering further victimisation."

Over two-thirds of the arrested miners have filed reports that they have been beaten and tortured in custody. Many suffer from tuberculosis and HIV/Aids and are unable to get medical attention. Most are not even allowed to attend the court proceedings, on the grounds that the courtroom is not large enough to accommodate them.

As the *New York Times* was forced to acknowledge, "The rage that had long been focused on white rule and white capitalism has turned on the ANC. South Africa's liberation party has become the establishment. It has forged deep links to the white business class, and through its affirmative action policies, a small but wealthy black elite has emerged. Even the venerable left-wing unions are seen by the have-nots as co-opted by the haves."

The ANC, and its partners in the Tripartite Alliance—the trade union federation COSATU and the South African Communist Party—continue to claim that the labour unrest at

Marikana was the outcome of "criminal activity" by members of the AMCU and other, non-union miners in a bid to undermine the NUM.

Such claims are belied by the wildcat strike at Gold Fields. The AMCU has no representation in the gold mines. The gold producers also practise a system of collective bargaining that some have said should now be extended throughout the mining industry to prevent a repeat of events at Marikana.

The NUM has denied any connection between the Gold Fields strike and that at Marikana. It claims that the latest dispute arises out of company plans to implement a compulsory funeral scheme, under which all workers would have R69 deducted from their salaries. But Gold Fields says that it had already agreed to drop the compulsory funeral scheme, drawn up by the NUM.

According to the South African business website *BDLive*, "It is understood that a faction among workers at the mine is dissatisfied with the new NUM branch leadership elected in September last year, and that the former branch chairman has rallied workers around him."

Mineweb reported, "NUM representatives from the highest levels are at the mine trying to settle the dispute."

The Gold Fields strike speaks to the hostility of broad masses of workers against the so-called "tenderpreneurs"—a layer of ANC, COSATU and NUM leaders who have built up fabulous wealth helping transnational corporations to exploit their workforce.

NUM founder and former ANC Secretary General Cyril Ramaphosa has indirect shares in Lonmin. This is because his Shanduka investment firm holds a majority stake in Lonmin's major Black Economic Empowerment partner, Incwala Resources. Ramaphosa also sits on Lonmin's board of directors.



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