

# South Africa's miners and the fear of "contagion"

Bill Van Auken  
5 September 2012

Monday's police shooting and wounding of four South African gold miners comes just three weeks after the August 16 massacre of 34 striking platinum miners at Lonmin's Marikana mine.

As at Marikana, the struggle at Gold One's Modder East mine is a wildcat strike launched in opposition to the National Union of Mineworkers. The NUM, South Africa's largest union and a pillar of the African National Congress government, has defended the Marikana massacre, demanding the jailing of militant miners.

The spread of the miners' struggles has sparked growing concern among investors in the mining firms, in South Africa's ruling ANC, and in its partners in the NUM bureaucracy. These fears found expression in a warning issued by Gary van Staden, of the NKC Independent Economists consulting firm: "I think there is a good prospect for contagion. There is a very good chance we will see a spreading of wildcat action on the mines."

The ruling class fears "contagion" because, four years after the 2008 Wall Street crash signaled the outbreak of a devastating global economic crisis, the situation facing South African workers is universal. In country after country, the working class faces a struggle against a political establishment that is utterly hostile to its social rights and controls parties and unions that have purported to represent workers.

Explosive class struggles have shattered the ANC regime's long-faded pretensions to be fighting for popular liberation. The strategists of the ruling class are now asking themselves with fear how far strikes and protests will spread, amid seething discontent in the working class.

In South Africa, eighteen years after the ending of legal apartheid—which came after decades of struggle and sacrifice by workers and the oppressed—the interests of the same multinational and South African firms that profited under white minority rule remain intact. They are now

defended by the ANC and the NUM, which speak for a layer of corrupt black officials and crony capitalists who were the sole beneficiaries of post-apartheid "black economic empowerment." For masses of South African workers, including miners whose back-breaking and dangerous toil earns them as little as \$300 a month, living conditions are as bad or worse as under white minority rule.

Katiso Mosebetsane—a 22-year-old who had come to Marikana to search for the body of his father, a miner killed in the August 16 massacre—summed up the feelings of masses of workers: "You have the employer, the government, the police and even the trade union working together. They're supposed to look after you, but they are against the people—that's apartheid," he told *The Independent*.

The eruption of class struggle in the South African mines comes in the midst of a wave of struggles on every continent: Chrysler workers in the US, Lufthansa flight crews in Europe, Hyundai workers in Asia, public sector workers in Brazil. These struggles are increasingly taking the form of open rebellion against the existing unions. To the extent that they remain under the control of these organizations, they are isolated, smothered and defeated.

Everywhere, one sees, in the words of the young South African worker, "the employer, the government, the police and even the trade union working together" to impose what amounts to a social counterrevolution against the working class. This is the response of the capitalist ruling classes to the crisis.

In explaining the role of the NUM in South Africa, many have referred to the evolution of Cyril Ramaphosa, who led the union in the 1980s, became the secretary general of the ANC in the early 1990s and by the end of that decade entered the private sector, enjoying a meteoric rise to become one of South Africa's richest men with a personal fortune of roughly \$230 million. He sits on the

board of Lonmin, whose oppression of the platinum miners led to the strike and massacre last month.

Again, while South Africa's history lends it a particular form, this phenomenon is hardly unique. In the US, the United Auto Workers union owns 55 percent of Chrysler's stock, and a UAW official sits on the company's board of directors. As with the South Africa miners, autoworkers, such as those at the Dundee Chrysler engine plant in Michigan who rejected the local contract negotiated by the UAW, confront this so-called "labor organization" as an enemy and a direct arm of the corporation.

Just as the South African NUM has a material interest in maintaining the oppressive conditions that generate profits for the mining corporations, so the UAW has a direct stake in imposing two-tier wages, 12-hour shifts and \$9-an-hour contract labor in auto plants. It is not primarily a matter of corruption or betrayal by this or that union official, but the transformation of these bureaucracies into business entities dedicated to policing the working class.

In South Africa, this has yielded the spectacle of the NUM—an organization claiming to represent the workers—helping police organize their massacre. A sharpening of the class struggles in Europe or America will produce a similar response.

In South Africa, as in the US and elsewhere, the working class must break with these organizations and build a new revolutionary leadership, aiming to take state power and pursue socialist policies, turning the mines, banks, and major corporations into public utilities democratically controlled by the workers.

This movement must be armed with a conscious internationalist strategy to unify the working class in every country around a common struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**