

South Africa: ANC orders security clampdown against miners' revolt

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17 September 2012

A march by hundreds of striking miners in South Africa's platinum mining belt was blocked and dispersed by police on Sunday.

The march was in protest against the state clampdown on wildcat strikes over conditions of backbreaking exploitation imposed by the major transnational corporations in league with the African National Congress (ANC) government and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

Earlier, some 1,000 soldiers and 500 police officers were deployed against "illegal gatherings" in the mining area. The raid followed an announcement by South African President Jacob Zuma on Friday banning assemblies of the workers.

The protest marked one month since the August 16 massacre of 34 striking rock drillers at the Lonmin-owned platinum mine in Marikana, near Johannesburg. The deadly assault on the strikers was authorized by the ANC and supported by the NUM. The miners had broken from the NUM, which has for years collaborated closely with the mining companies, and joined the rival Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

The strikers have not been cowed, however, and unrest has spread. More than 40,000 workers are now on strike, forcing three leading platinum and gold producers to halt their operations.

The security clampdown came as strikers at Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) in Rustenburg, northwest of Johannesburg, called for a general strike. The same day, workers at Lonmin rejected the company's latest pay offer as an insult. The workers, who are currently paid between 4,000 and 5,000 rand (\$488 to \$610) a month, are demanding 12,500 rand. The company had offered just 1,000 rand extra.

At a press conference, Justice Minister Jeff Radebe refused

to rule out the use of live ammunition against the spreading unrest. While the government stopped short of declaring an official state of emergency, one exists de facto. The South African army was placed on a state of alert last week.

"It appears now that the mining industry is at stake," Radebe said, warning that those involved "are going to be dealt with very swiftly, without any delay."

Hours after his announcement, police used tear gas against miners striking the Aquarius Platinum mine near Rustenburg, arresting seven.

On Saturday morning, a special squad raided miners' hostels in the Marikana area to confiscate machetes and other weapons. Military helicopters and armoured vehicles were deployed in the assault. As residents set up barricades of burning tyres, police used tear gas and rubber bullets in the shantytown near the Lonmin mine.

The Marikana massacre was the worst act of police brutality since the days of apartheid. Some 270 miners arrested during the assault were then charged with complicity in the deaths of their 34 colleagues under the notorious apartheid-era "common purpose law".

Although the charges have been dropped for now, the latest operation has underscored that the interests of the same multinational and South African firms that profited under apartheid remain intact. The Regulation of Gatherings Act now being enforced by the ANC was notoriously employed by the apartheid government.

This has led to complaints that the ANC's police actions are only fuelling the revolt. Bishop Jo Seoka, president of the South African Council of Churches, said the "government must be crazy believing that, what to me resembles an apartheid-era crackdown, can succeed." He warned, "We must not forget that such crackdowns in the

past led to more resistance.”

Increasingly, however, the ANC and its partners in the NUM and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) have as little legitimacy as the white minority regime the ANC replaced 18 years before.

Comprising a thin layer of wealthy and corrupt black officials, they have been the sole beneficiaries of the post-apartheid policy of “black economic empowerment”. Leading members of the ANC and the trade unions own significant shares in multi-billion-rand corporate ventures and profit directly from the super-exploitation of their workforces, which they are acting ruthlessly to continue.

Anger at this state of affairs has led to a situation where, as the news agency Reuters noted, “The wave of labour unrest in Africa's biggest economy has spiralled beyond the control of the government and unions into a grass-roots rebellion by black South Africans who have seen little improvement in their lives since apartheid ended...”

Last week, ANC members of the parliamentary Mineral Resources Committee refused to visit Lonmin to attempt to placate the miners. “We can't go and talk to a crowd with suicidal tendencies,” ANC member Rose Sonto said.

In the mining areas, NUM officials can barely appear in public, as the unrest is directed as much against the union as the companies it is protecting. The NUM supported the weekend crackdown in Marikana, while the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) called on Zuma to declare a state of emergency in the mining sector to prevent “anarchy.”

The ANC and its partners justify the state brutality as a necessary response to labour unrest caused by “violent criminals” and an inter-union rivalry involving the break-away Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union.

But as *Businessday* warned gloomily, the AMCU “seems not to have any control over the situation.” AMCU leader Joseph Mathunjwa “sounds as desperate as” NUM leaders, it wrote, “and has been reduced to calling for President Jacob Zuma to take the lead in resolving the situation.”

Comparing the revolt to a “veld fire that is threatening to run out of control”, it complained that “instead of trying to get a team of firefighters into action, the trade unions, the government and the mining industry appear to be mere bystanders, looking on aghast at the spreading crisis.”

Demands are now being made for unspecified “action” against expelled ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema, who has toured mining areas denouncing Zuma and the mining corporations.

Last week he addressed a group of 40 disaffected soldiers in Johannesburg who were subject to internal disciplinary proceedings after they participated in a wage protest in August 2009.

The small gathering led to hysterical claims that a “mutiny” was being prepared, which was then used as the pretext for last week's state of alert and the ensuing security clampdown.

South Africa Security Forces Union president Bheki Mvovo claimed that Malema was ready to sponsor an “Arab Spring-style uprising.”

In fact, Malema—an inveterate opportunist who has made millions through government-contracts awarded to his companies—has made clear that the opposite is the case.

While denouncing Zuma and other individuals, Malema is careful not to indict the ANC itself, so as to leave the door open for his re-admittance to the organisation. Referring to the grassroots unrest, Malema told the *Mail and Globe*, “There was a political vacuum and we occupied that space. If we failed to do that the wrong elements would have taken that space.”

Gareth Newham, head of the Crime and Justice programme at the Institute for Security Studies, said Malema's meetings with the soldiers were intended to signal that “he is more dangerous outside the ANC than he is in the ANC.”



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