

South Africa's strike wave hits whole mining sector, spreads to transport

Chris Marsden
28 September 2012

The strike wave that began at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine is now engulfing South Africa's platinum, gold and coal mining industries and has spread to transport and other sectors.

In total, there are more than 100,000 workers on strike across South Africa.

On August 16, police opened fire on striking Marikana workers, killing 34 and wounding 78. The bitter struggle was called off only after the strikers had secured a 22 percent wage increase. Their determined stand has emboldened many more to go into struggle against the employers.

David Davis, a SGB Securities gold analyst, warned that "Workers are now demanding wage increases according to the 'Lonmin settlement'."

He added that the contagion of illegal strikes "will likely engulf the industry".

Anglo American Platinum, or Amplats, the world's largest producer, has said it has 21,000 employees out on a wildcat strike who have defied threats of dismissal to demand a wage increase equivalent to Marikana. Only 20 percent of the workforce at four mines at Rustenberg had reported in Friday.

Like the Marikana workers, Amplats miners view the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and other unions as stooges for the employers and have rejected them wholesale. They have not turned to the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), but have elected a leadership from the rank and file.

This did not stop AngloGold from claiming that the strikes were "obviously coordinated".

NUM spokesperson Lesiba Seshoka said, "We do not have anything from them.... Our greatest worry is that if you are going to have sporadic demands throughout the industry, then it will undermine collective bargaining

and that's going to be chaos."

Wildcat strike action has broken out at Gold Fields, AngloGold and other company mines. Fully 39 percent of South African gold mines' capacity has been hit, with workers again demanding a 22 percent wage increase.

AngloGold Ashanti, the third-largest gold producer, suspended all its South African operations this week. Most of its 35,000 workers throughout the company have joined a wildcat that began at Kopanong on September 20.

The major fear of management is that workers are bypassing the trade unions, their industrial policemen. "The real concern is the apparent breakdown of the collective bargaining system that has operated effectively since the mid-1980s," Alan Fine, a spokesman for AngloGold, told the *Financial Times*, "Our challenge is to ensure the system survives."

Coal of Africa has also announced that employees at its Mooiplaats colliery have struck in the first industrial action to hit the coal sector since Marikana.

A strike by 20,000 workers in the freight and transport sector to demand a 12 percent wage increase has become increasingly angry, despite the official control of four unions—the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union, the Professional Transport and Allied Workers' Union South Africa, the Transport and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa and the Motor Transport Workers' Union.

A number of trucks have been looted and burned, and emergency services have been placed on high alert after fighting ended in the hospitalisation of scabs.

The chief executive of AngloGold Ashanti, Mark Cutifani, warned that demands for higher wages were now "a risk for the country."

The employers have made increasingly bellicose threats, with Amplats having initiated disciplinary proceedings Friday and threatening sackings, and Gold Fields obtaining a second interdict against striking workers at its Beatrix mine that meant "Firing the striking workers is an option."

But the main threat to the miners and other workers comes from the state and the African National Congress (ANC) government.

Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant has declared that there is "no justification for the recent wave of unprocedural [illegal] strikes" and "no excuse for lawlessness."

In New York, President Jacob Zuma told the Associated Press Wednesday that the wave of "illegal" strikes was not due to inequalities but was "influenced by this particular [Marikana] strike and it has also been influenced by the manner in which the resolution has been undertaken, whereas the unions that were in the forefront in this case because of the circumstances were not necessarily in the forefront."

This had "influenced some other miners to go on strike," he said.

The repudiation of the trade unions poses a major political crisis for the entire bourgeoisie.

Alexander Joe, writing for AFP, states, "The violent crisis that has shaken South Africa's mines shows workers' distrust for traditional trade unions, up to now the guardians of social peace despite the country's deep inequality."

He cites analyst Daniel Silke explaining, "Marikana holds the potential for an era in South African labour relations where violent strike action forces the hand of weakened management, as opposed to historical collective bargaining promoted by COSATU and its affiliate unions."

"The key issue here is whether the trade union movement, whether COSATU itself, can keep a handle on the more militant workers who have smelled blood with management as a result of Marikana," said Silke.

The emerging mass political and social movement of the working class and the undermining of its key ally, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), has plunged the ANC into crisis, with the escalating factional conflict between Zuma and his supporters and those of Julius Malema, the expelled former head of the ANC's youth wing, only the most

open expression.

On Wednesday, Malema appeared before the Polokwane Regional Court on charges of money laundering. A corrupt "tenderpreneur", he is nonetheless an amateur compared with some of those who have engineered the prosecution, such as Zuma himself.

To strengthen his hand, Malema advances himself as the friend of the miners and has called for the industry to be nationalised. But his aim is only to secure the ascendancy of his faction within the ANC, not to challenge its role as the chief political defender of the South African bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations and banks.

He was able to mobilise a demonstration of only around a thousand outside the court, but did marshal his supporters in the ANC, including former ANC Youth League (ANCYL) Secretary General Sindiso Magaqa, now leader of the Friends of the Youth League, and from his power-base in Limpopo.

Outside the court, Malema made a point of praising ANC leaders Kgalema Motlanthe and Fikile Mbalula, whom he supports as challengers to the Zuma leadership.

He urged, "We must make sure Jacob Zuma does not become president of the ANC.... The next day we must remove him as a president and the day after we must charge him."

In response, COSATU President Sidumo Dlamini said Thursday that the trade unions wanted "stability of leadership" at the ANC congress in Mangaung in December. Closing COSATU's annual congress, he said, "This country does not need factionalism, it doesn't need divisions of leadership, it needs stability of leadership."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact