

12,000 miners fired as South African strike wave grows

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Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), the world's largest platinum producer, fired 12,000 striking South African miners Friday as the transnational corporations, the African National Congress government and the COSATU union federation sought to quell a growing wave of wildcat strikes.

The mass firing was announced by Amplats three weeks into a wildcat strike by some 28,000 miners at its four mines in Rustenberg and just a day after clashes between miners and South African police there left another miner dead.

"Yesterday [Thursday] the cops shot many people, but one of them is dead, even the dead body is still there where he was shot yesterday, it has not yet been taken (away)," Gaddhafi Mdoda, a representative of the strikers, told AFP on Friday. He said that in addition to rubber bullets and tear gas the police had fired upon the miners with live ammunition. The killing came after repeated police attacks aimed at preventing the miners from gathering for a meeting.

On Friday, Amplat workers demonstrated again outside a shantytown near the mine, blocking streets with burning tires and rocks as riot police backed by armored cars moved in to repress them.

The strikers have grown increasingly angry over the police repression and the company's refusal to negotiate on their demand for a 16,000 rand (\$1,800) monthly wage. Earlier this week, two mine conveyor belts were torched along with a training center and several automobiles.

Amplats tried to justify its mass firing by saying that the workers had ignored the company's demand that they appear for disciplinary hearings. Management admits that it has been unable to get more than 20 percent of its workforce to show up at their jobs and has therefore been forced to halt mining operations.

The strike had spread on Tuesday to another Amplats mine in Limpopo, South Africa's northernmost province, some 250 miles to the north.

The refusal of the Limpopo miners to go underground brought to 75,000 the number of workers in the mining sector who are on strike in defiance of the mining corporations, the ANC government and the official unions of

COSATU and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). This represents 15 percent of the industry's total workforce.

The strike wave was triggered by the walkout two months ago by platinum miners at Lonmin's (the second-biggest platinum miner) Marikana mine demanding higher pay. The ANC government and its security forces responded to their strike, which was opposed by the NUM and COSATU, with the worst massacre since the end of the apartheid regime 18 years ago. Heavily armed police gunned down strikers, killing 34 and wounding another 78, with many of them shot in the back.

The killings, along with the arrests and brutalization of hundreds more miners, failed to break the strike, and Lonmin decided it had to end the workers' uprising by granting the miners wage increases of up to 22 percent.

Both outrage over the killings—which reminded many in South Africa of similar massacres by the white minority regime at Sharpeville and Soweto—and increased boldness resulting from Lonmin's retreat before the miners' militancy led to the spread of wildcat strikes throughout much of the mining industry and beyond.

From the platinum sector, the strike wave has spread to gold, iron ore, diamond and chrome mines. In virtually every case, the strikes are in defiance of low-wage contracts imposed by the mining bosses and the NUM and have therefore been declared illegal.

At Gold Fields, the world's fourth-largest gold-mining company, management evicted 5,000 striking miners from company dormitories, claiming that they were using their housing to organize strike action and stop other workers from going into the mines. Gold Fields has obtained a court order allowing it to fire the strikers. Several of the miners' leaders have been jailed.

COSATU sent its general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi into talks with Gold Fields CEO Nick Holland in an attempt to end the three-week-old walkout by more than 13,000 miners. A company spokesman said that the talks between the CEO and the top union bureaucrat had gone well. He added, however, "We are now waiting to see what happens with the

miners after they meet with their representatives.” Clearly there is little confidence that the strikers will follow directions from COSATU or the NUM.

AngloGold Ashanti, South Africa’s largest bullion producer, has been almost entirely shut down, with at least 24,000 of its 35,000 workers on strike. The corporation’s management has also threatened to retaliate with mass dismissals.

AngloGold’s CEO Mark Cutifani insisted that he would not concede to any demands outside of the formal bargaining structure set up by the company and the NUM. The SAPA news agency quoted him as saying that AngloGold “could not risk being seen as rewarding illegal, violent, intimidating actions by striking workers.”

Over 28,000 truck drivers have been on strike for two weeks and one of their unions, SATAWU, has said it will call on South African rail and port workers to walk out next week. The truckers’ strike has begun to affect industrial production, with General Motors reporting that its car plant in Port Elizabeth on South Africa’s south coast had been forced to curtail operations. Shell Oil, meanwhile, has formally notified its franchises that it may be unable to safely deliver fuel, sparking fear of a gasoline shortage.

South Africa’s Road Freight Employers Association obtained a court injunction Friday against acts of violence in the strike after the burning of a number of delivery trucks.

Some 7,100 workers at Toyota’s Durban plant ended a four-day strike on Friday after accepting a 5.4 percent wage hike. The wildcat action sparked fears within corporate and government circles that the wave of militancy that has shaken the mining sector will now sweep through basic industry as well.

“We are worried about these strikes,” Labor Minister Mildred Oliphant declared on Friday. “I think there are people who are stirring this up.”

South African President Jacob Zuma delivered a speech Friday to the South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Johannesburg, which suggested that the ANC president was a million miles away from the reality of mass struggles erupting in the working class.

He referred briefly to having “gone through a difficult period” of wildcat strikes and the massacre in Marikana and then went on to say, “Let me use this opportunity to remind business and labor of the need to ensure shop-floor peace and stability in the country, in order for us to continue the collective responsibility of promoting economic growth and development.” The problem, however, is that the workers have risen in revolt against the system established by the corporations and the ANC’s allied unions to maintain this “peace and stability” and thereby assure mining firms and other capitalist sectors unimpeded profits.

Zuma added, as if the problem was merely a matter of perception, “We should not seek to portray ourselves as a nation that is perpetually fighting.”

He acknowledged that “the gap between rich and poor still remains,” in South Africa, one of the most socially unequal countries on the planet, while attributing this to it “taking longer to re-engineer the economy to provide opportunities” for the country’s impoverished masses.

No such “re-engineering” has been attempted in the 18 years since the end of apartheid. Instead, the ANC emerged as the defender of capitalism and the same financial, mining and industrial corporations that dominated the country under apartheid. In return, it was the beneficiary of “black empowerment” policies that transformed a thin layer of ANC officials—including former NUM president and ANC general secretary Cyril Ramaphosa—and politically connected black businessmen into multimillionaires.

It is this entire setup that is now facing a challenge from below, with the mass strikes of miners and other sections of the working class, together with the spread of protests by residents of the country’s poor townships over the government’s failure to provide decent housing, sanitation and other basic services.

The offensive by the South African working class has provoked growing alarm in the world financial markets, with mining stocks suffering sharp declines: Lonmin down by 39 percent, and Amplats by 21 percent this year. Moody’s has downgraded South Africa’s credit rating, warning that the country’s government was showing a “reduced capacity” to meet the demands of striking miners and the masses of unemployed.



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