

Strikes spread across South Africa despite mass sackings

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In the face of a growing wave of walkouts by workers across South Africa, mining companies are announcing mass layoffs of striking employees.

Last week, Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), the world's largest platinum producer, fired 12,000 striking miners. This was in response to a three-week wildcat strike of 28,000 miners at the company's four mines in Rustenberg.

Just a day before the announcement, a miner was killed as police clashed with workers. The miner was the latest of almost 50 workers who have been killed by state forces in recent weeks, including the 34 shot dead by police on August 16 at Lonmin's Marikana mine.

Amplats' lead was followed Tuesday as two more mining companies fired over 3,500 workers involved in strikes that began October 1 against low pay and intolerable working conditions. Platinum mining firm Atlatza sacked 2,161 workers for participating in a strike last week at its Bokoni mine, which the company declared to be illegal. Management gave the workers only until the close of business the following day to appeal.

The Gold One mining company fired 1,435 workers, 75 percent of its employees, at a gold and uranium mine located outside Johannesburg. It gave workers until Thursday to appeal the decision. The company then issued an ominous warning that police repression awaited any opposition to the decision, stating, "The South African Police Service is maintaining a strong presence at the operation to ensure that there are no acts of intimidation or violence. Currently, only essential services are continuing."

The wave of retaliatory sackings has not, however, halted the spread of mostly unofficial strikes. The growing rebellion of workers in South Africa is

assuming the form of an unofficial national movement in defiance of the corporations, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) government and the official trade unions.

Since August, when workers employed by the platinum firm Lonmin began a stoppage over pay, more than 100,000 workers across South Africa, including 75,000 miners at more than 20 mines, have been involved in strikes and disputes. The struggles have included workers in transport, auto and other sectors.

Strikes throughout the gold mining industry have reportedly reduced output nationwide by more than 40 percent. Africa's largest producers of gold—AngloGold Ashanti Ltd., Gold Fields Ltd., and Harmony Gold Mining—have all been hit.

In the aftermath of the 22 percent wage increase won by workers at the Lonmin mine in Marikana, miners at AngloGold Ashanti brought operations to a standstill to demand a similar pay deal. They joined 13,000 Gold Fields miners who have been involved in wildcat strikes for several weeks. Miners employed at Harmony's Kusasalethu mine have been striking since the beginning of October.

Workers employed at Kumba iron ore, a subsidiary of Anglo American and among the top 10 iron ore producers in the world, are also striking. Employees at the firm's Sishen Mine in the Northern Cape walked off the job in an unofficial strike on October 3 in pursuit of a monthly salary increase of 15,000 rand (\$1,725) for all employees. The workers immediately blocked access to the pit, forcing it to cease production the following day. A company statement issued Monday said, "The strikers are all permanent employees belonging to the company's recognised unions, but are acting on their own without union representation."

On Tuesday, 400 workers employed at Xstrata's platinum mine in Brits, in the northwest of the country, began strike action to demand a pay increase.

Workers at Samancor's Western Chrome Mine continue wildcat action, and coal miners have struck in unofficial action over pay at the Mooiplaats Colliery in Mpumalanga. A nationwide coal miners strike would rapidly lead to the shutdown of the economy, as some 85 percent of South Africa's electricity is produced from coal.

Also on Tuesday it was reported that two transport unions had pulled their members out of the ongoing truckers' strike. According to the freight employers association, the unions ended their stoppage after their members won a "double-digit" pay increase.

Despite this, some 28,000 workers, members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, vowed to fight on. The truckers strike is having a major impact on the economy, with an employers' organisation stating that the freight industry was losing some 1.2 billion rand (\$135 million) in turnover each week.

It was announced that next week port workers are to strike for three days and rail workers for one day in secondary action in support of the truckers.

Alongside threats and repression, a number of mining companies have attempted to end the strikes by entering into negotiations and offering higher pay deals than the norm.

Commenting Tuesday, John Meyer, an investment bank analyst, said, "It is no surprise that the strikes are spreading and we expect to see most sectors affected by some form of action this year."

As a result of the collusion of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) with the corporations, workers have left the organization in droves, with many refusing to join any of the official trade unions.

The NUM bureaucracy, which has played a key role as an industrial police force over one of the most militant sections of workers, in partnership with the ANC and the South African Communist Party, is now threatened by a growing mass oppositional movement from below.

The scale of the desertion of workers from the NUM can be seen in the fact that on October 1, Impala Platinum wrote to the union stating that it no longer had

a sufficient number of members to be recognised at the company's Rustenburg mine. Impala said that since March, the majority of its 28,000 employees had abandoned the NUM and the union now represented only 13 percent of the workforce, down from a previous claimed figure of 70 percent.

A report on allafrica.com noted that the NUM must embrace 50 percent or more of the workers to be recognised by the company, and that Impala gave it three months to meet this target.

Another indication of the growing hostility of workers to the official trade union apparatus was an article Tuesday in *Independent Online* reporting that earlier in the day, NUM and local COSATU leaders tried to address the workers at Anglo American Platinum's Amandelbult mine, but had to leave when their car was stoned.

On Wednesday, hundreds of sacked Amplats workers, who have refused to accept their dismissals, attempted to enter the regional offices of the NUM in Rustenburg in order to resign from the organisation en masse. They were blocked by police from entering the building. Earlier in the day, NUM representative Lesiba Seshoka said, "Miners cannot cancel their membership when they have been dismissed, because they are unemployed."

Commenting on the incident, the *Mail and Guardian* stated, "The move by Amplats workers points to the continued downward slide of the union, which the tragic strike by Lonmin workers in Marikana seemed to exacerbate. The current wave of strikes, which first swept the platinum sector before moving on to other industries, has been helmed by independent striking committees that have pushed for wage demands outside of established bargaining agreements." The article cited an Amplats strike committee member who said "workers would finish what they started without union interference."



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