Strikes continue in South Africa amid deepening repression

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Tens of thousands of South Africa miners remain on strike in wildcat action, following a breakdown in talks between trade unions and management.

Following the failure to end strikes at South Africa's three largest gold producers--Anglo Gold Ashanti Ltd., Gold Fields Ltd., Harmony Gold Mining--the Chamber of Mines, negotiating on behalf of the companies, announced Friday it would meet the unions again on Monday. The companies had previously given miners until the night shift last Thursday to return to work.

On Friday, South African president and African National Congress (ANC) leader Jacob Zuma also met with union and mining industry representatives in an attempt to end the disputes. Since Lonmin platinum miners walked off the job in August, strikes have spread nationwide, involving more than 100,000 miners across the platinum, gold and iron ore industries. They have developed into a near-insurgent movement that threatens ANC rule.

Further clashes between police and miners took place over the weekend. On Friday evening, police used teargas and rubber bullets against 1,000 miners and their supporters marching towards the Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) Khomanani 1 mine shaft near Rustenburg. Following the attack, the police made a number of arrests. This followed a protest Thursday in which hundreds of strikers picketed outside Amplats Bathopele mine in Rustenburg.

Also on Friday, police arrested 72 miners at Gold Fields KDC's Kloof mine in Westonaria, Gauteng. After a march, hundreds of miners attempted a sit-in. Police brigadier Neville Malila said "rubber bullets and stunned grenades were used to defuse the situation".

On Saturday, hundreds of miners marched on the headquarters of Impala Platinum in Johannesburg to present a list of grievances.

Miners at Kumba Iron Ore remain underground in a wildcat occupation of the company's Sishen mine. The firm has now threatened legal action against the strikers who, it says, are in control of 3.3 billion rand ($380 million) worth of equipment, including 88 haul trucks and bulldozers.

Two strike-breakers died Thursday after they were reportedly attacked by strikers for going to work at Amplats' Rustenburg mine. A report in *The Star* commented, "In response police arrested more than 40 people in connection with incidents of public violence". Police spokesman Brigadier Thulani Ngubane said, without presenting any evidence, "They will also face charges of murder and damage to property".

Since the beginning of the strike wave, 51 people have died, the vast majority at the hands of the police, including the 34 strikers brutally massacred at Lonmin's Marikana mine on August 16.

The mining firms are preparing to carry out more mass firings if the strikers don't return to work, following the lead of Amplats and two other companies who recently fired more than 15,000 miners. Despite their dismissals, these workers have vowed to continue striking. A *Financial Times* report stated Friday, "If workers continue to reject the proposals, the gold companies' options will include reopening negotiations on existing wage agreements … dismissing illegally striking miners, and/or retrenchments".

More than 24,000 miners are striking at two Gold Fields-owned mines. The company warned Friday that even if they went back to work soon, job losses would follow. A spokesperson said that the strikes would "increase the likelihood of major restructuring in the South African gold mining industry, including at Gold Fields".

Although acknowledging that some concessions would have to be granted to the miners, due to their determined stance, the *Financial Times* reported that "an industry official said the companies had agreed to the proposals with the understanding that they would not increase their overall wage bills by more than 3 per cent".

The preoccupation of South Africa's union officialdom has been to suppress the miners' actions and prevent them from developing into a united mass movement of the working class.

The government, transport industry and trade unions worked hard to ensure that a three-week strike by truckers

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ended over the past weekend. On Friday four trade unions representing around 40,000 drivers signed a wage deal ending the strike that threatened to bring the economy to a halt.

Much press speculation centred on the pressure on the employers to end the strike and agree a substantial pay deal, regardless of its immediate impact on the economy. In fact, the official unions agreed a deal well below the 12 percent increase demanded at the beginning of the strike.

Full details of the agreement have not been released, but implicit is a no-strike clause. Speaking about the agreement, the National Bargaining Council of the Road Freight and Logistics Industry said that it "offers stability to the road freight and logistics industry for a long time". Vincent Masoga, a spokesman for the main union, said, "We apologize and we sympathize with all South Africans for the pain this strike caused them. We are going back to work".

Despite the determined efforts of the unions and companies to quash the strike wave, even more South African workers began stoppages and protests last week. Some 3,800 clothing workers employed at 35 companies struck in Newcastle to demand a "living wage". The workers are currently paid a below-minimum wage rate of between 250 and 400 rand [$US28-$US46] a week.

On Friday, 3,000 municipal workers in North West Province, the location of the nation's main platinum firms, protested against "rampant corruption" in the municipalities.

In action that could paralyze local government, the South African Municipal Workers' Union, representing 190,000 members, said they were set to meet employers on Tuesday and that a nationwide strike was possible.

Such is the anger of the workers and their growing militancy that even the ad hoc strike committees that have sprung up in opposition to the official trade union structures have been unable to contain the rebellion. Evans Ramokga, a prominent strike committee member at the Amplats mine near Rustenberg, who calls for the formation of a union independent of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), said last week the committee's attempts to "calm down workers seem to be falling on deaf ears". He added, "They're very angry and the situation has gone out of control".

Comprising a thin layer of wealthy and corrupt black officials, the NUM and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) have little more legitimacy than the white minority regime the ANC replaced 18 years ago.

As a result of the NUM's naked collusion with the corporations, including profiteering from its close relations with the mining conglomerates, workers have left the NUM in droves, with many refusing to join any of the other official trade unions. Even before the mass strikes began, many workers had quit the NUM. Last week, hundreds of miners in Rustenberg attempted to hand in their union cards en masse, with some openly burning their union T-shirts.

Since the beginning of the strike, several NUM officials have been killed. On Friday, two miners were arrested and are expected to be charged with the murder of NUM branch secretary Daluvuyo Bongo. On September 11, another NUM shop steward was killed.

Last week, COSATU provincial secretary Solly Phetoe said of the strikes, "This is clearly no longer about wages but a clear attack on the NUM, COSATU and its members". He falsely claimed that workers were only leaving the NUM under duress, stating, "Workers are now under attack and being forced to join other unions that are not their choice. Workers are forced to get into unprotected strikes".

In response to the attacks on NUM officials, Malesela Maleka, a spokesperson of the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP), the long-time partner of the NUM and the ANC in the "Tripartite Alliance" said, "To use violence to mobilise workers away from their organisation must be strongly condemned".

Denouncing any struggle of the working class outside the sclerotic existing trade unions as impermissible, Maleka said, "Over a period of time the SACP has been warning of an existence of a lumpen tendency that is prepared to do anything, including these senseless killings, to assume power in society".

The *Mail and Guardian* reported that in response to the attacks on NUM officials, the "SACP called on the state to act 'with haste'". Since the beginning of the strikes, the SACP has endorsed the repression of workers involved in the wildcat strikes and joined the NUM and ANC in defending the police after the massacre at Marikana.

The SACP and NUM are not alone in fearing that the mass strike wave is rapidly moving out of the control of the union bureaucracy.

Labour analyst Gavin Brown said last week, "Our collective bargaining system is already very sophisticated given the structure of our economy and the composition of the labour force. The system is capable of addressing all the issues behind the current strikes but was never intended to deal with armed insurrection and criminal violence on the scale we have seen recently".

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