

# South African miners defy repression

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On Friday, Gold Fields boasted that threats of mass sackings had succeeded in forcing the 9,000 workers at its Beatrix mine and 90 percent of the 14,300 workers at KDC West back to work. But a new strike by platinum miners at Lonmin's operation in Marikana delivered a blow to efforts to stem the working class upsurge, with tens of thousands of workers remaining in struggle.

Marikana workers struck Thursday in defence of colleagues subjected to police persecution and arrest. Miners in Marikana began the present strike wave in August and refused to return to work after police killed 34 strikers and wounded 78. The strikes spread after Lonmin agreed a 22 percent pay hike to settle the Marikana dispute, fuelling demands for similar rises throughout the mining industry. Reports are unclear, but it is believed that between 80,000 and 100,000 miners have been on strike at various points.

In the most detailed account of recent events, the *Daily Maverick* notes that just one week before an official inquiry into the Marikana massacre, police have embarked on a wave of arrests of militants and strike leaders.

On October 15, workers at the Marikana mine managed to prevent the arrest by security guards of strike leader "Rasta" Thembele Sohadi when he clocked in at Three Shaft. The police were waiting outside the main entrance. On October 17, Xolani Nzuza, a leader of the ad hoc strike committee, and a striker known as Mzet were arrested and held at an unknown location. They are reportedly to be charged with two murders, including of an official from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

Several other miners, witnesses to what happened at the August 16 massacre, are among those arrested. The *Daily Maverick* focuses on the case of Bangile Mpotye, who was arrested October 14 on charges of fraud, even though no charges have been officially laid by Lonmin.

Mpotye was first arrested August 20 and accused of shooting and killing a police officer. Four days of beating and torture followed before he was released.

"What is astonishing is that Mpotye claims the police transported him to Lonmin mine every day, and his beatings happened at Lonmin," the *Daily Maverick* reports. "A lawyer working on Marikana cases says it is obvious that this is a wave of terror to intimidate witnesses who would otherwise give evidence at the Farlam Commission."

The intimidation at Marikana is the most blatant example of a broad campaign involving tens of thousands being sacked or threatened with the sack, as well as mass arrests and police violence.

Gold Fields, the world's fourth-largest bullion producer, has also threatened to sack 8,500 strikers at its KDC East facility. A spokesman for the company declared, "The raiding of hostels and disarming of strikers gave workers the confidence to return to work."

Anglo American Platinum Ltd (Amplats) said it intended to go ahead with the sacking of 12,000 miners at its Rustenburg facility, but would discuss their status with recognised trade unions. It reported only 20 percent attendance at its facilities.

Atlatsa Resources fired 3,000 employees at its Bokoni platinum mine.

The *Mail & Guardian* described October 18 how striking workers at Kumba Iron Ore's Sishen mine gathered near the Kathu Magistrate's Court in solidarity with 47 workers arrested two days earlier. The detained workers' appeal for bail was denied by the court and a second hearing was delayed until October 26 in violation of a law preventing anyone being held for more than 48 hours without charge.

Strikes have hit Lonmin, Aquarius, Impala, Anglo American Platinum, Royal Bafokeng Platinum, Xstrata, AngloGold Ashanti, Gold Fields, Gold One, Harmony Gold, Kumba Iron Ore, Petra Diamonds, Forbes,

Manhattan Coal and Samancor. In addition to miners, 180,000 municipal workers and bus drivers are beginning strike action this week. Toyota halted production at its Durban facility Wednesday due to a strike at a parts supplier.

The mood in mining areas has an insurgent character, with mine buildings, scabs, police officers and police stations coming under attack. Mini-buses and taxis carrying scabs have been torched.

The unrest is directed in particular against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which is viewed as the labour police force for the companies. NUM General Secretary Frans Baleni recently boasted that his organisation has spent one million rand on a campaign to end wildcat strikes. This was “money well spent” to “get people to understand the risk they’re putting themselves and the country in,” he said, denouncing “people who are organising anarchy and economic sabotage”.

“You need just one mine to break this strike,” he added.

The *Mail & Guardian* writes of an organisation suffering a “slow, sure, violent implosion”. It notes that the NUM claims that so far this year 13 of its local officials have been killed by strikers, and hundreds of Implats workers marched on the NUM’s regional headquarters in Rustenburg this month demanding the immediate cancellation of their union membership.

At Lonmin and Implats, the NUM has lost at least 20,000 members. NUM membership at Implats has now dropped from 70 percent to 13 percent and the real figure could be even lower because workers neglect to officially leave. The union is rapidly approaching extinction.

Reporters from the *Daily Maverick* visited Gold Fields KDC West mine in Carletonville prior to the end of the strike there. Strikers explained that some 1,500 of them had not returned to work Thursday because they had been waiting for NUM President Senzeni Zokwana to formally move the offer made by the Chamber of Mines, as promised when he visited the mine on Wednesday. They then found out they had been sacked.

Jeffrey Mphahlele, general secretary of the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), stepped in to convince workers to return to work on Friday while ripping up

their NUM cards and switching to the new union. The workers are now demanding, in addition to equalisation of pay and the withdrawal of all sackings, that NUM leaders at KDC West resign. They are threatening to resume their strike if these demands are not met.

The AMCU was also reportedly instrumental in stopping the strike at Marikana developing into an indefinite wildcat action. According to another *Daily Maverick* report, an “AMCU representative and the union’s lawyer managed to convince the people that another strike wasn’t the sensible way to reach their objectives.”

AMCU membership is near the 50 percent-plus level at both Implats and Lonmin that is required for the AMCU to be recognised as the official negotiating body. It is benefiting from the widespread hatred of the NUM, but using the confidence placed in it to restore order. Many strikes, however, are being led by ad-hoc strike committees.



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