

Striking South African miners oppose rally called by official unions

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The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) called a rally and march Saturday at the Olympia Stadium, Rustenburg in what was meant to be a show of strength. COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi had vowed to “reclaim the Rustenburg area from the forces of counterrevolution.”

Vavi was to appear before an audience bussed in from surrounding areas, alongside Blade Nzimande, South African Communist Party (SACP) general secretary and minister in the African National Congress (ANC)-dominated Tripartite Alliance, and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) General Secretary Frans Baleni.

Instead, the protest demonstrated how eviscerated these organisations have become and the hostility of broad masses of workers towards them.

The so-called “forces of counterrevolution” identified by Vavi are tens of thousands of striking miners who have rebelled against backbreaking exploitation and poverty wages and against the NUM, which functions as a house union for the mining companies.

Rustenburg has been at the centre of a wildcat insurgency that began in August at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana and spread across the mining sector to involve some 100,000 workers at its peak.

On Saturday, over 1,000 striking Amplats miners arrived early at the Olympia Stadium and occupied the venue. Wearing black T-shirts with the slogan “Remember the Slain of Marikana” and “Forward with Living Wage —R12500”, they carried placards reading, “Don’t Let Police Get Away with Murder” and “We Are Here to Bury NUM.”

The Sapa news agency cited Tshepang Moloi from the Rustenburg branch of the National Striking Committee stating, “We have a message for

Zwelinzima Vavi: We are not going back to work until our demands are met”. Another striker shouted, “We are dying underground while you sit on chairs above and earn money!”

As the strikers marched into the stadium, NUM officials fled. The workers burnt ANC and COSATU T-shirts and then left to sing and shout slogans outside the gates, which were padlocked by police.

In his account of events for the *Daily Maverick*, Greg Marinovich noted, “Police have banned most marches by Marikana miners and even women’s marches as a threat to public safety. Yet, despite it being clear that large-scale clashes would erupt if COSATU insisted on holding the rally at the stadium, police opted to heed COSATU’s desires and moved in to clear the miners.”

Three COSATU officials were assaulted. Marinovich recounts that government and union officials watched as COSATU members beat and stripped Rehad Desai from the Marikana solidarity campaign. Police then began firing stun grenades, tear gas and rubber bullets and chased the strikers into the neighbouring streets. The shooting lasted for over an hour.

Inside the stadium, SACP General Secretary Nzimande praised the police action and told the audience that the SACP would never allow the destruction of the NUM. “NUM is the best capable union to represent mineworkers in South Africa”, he said.

But Nzimande was addressing a rally attended by just 500 to 1,000 people, according to varying reports. The NUM has all but disintegrated and is kept going only because of its key role in the government and state apparatus.

As Marinovich concluded, “What happened at Olympia stadium is the start of open competition and conflict between organised labour with links to the

ruling party (with the support of the organs of state), and an increasingly disempowered and frustrated workforce, who were once the vanguard of the Alliance.

“The ANC-linked union federation is determined to keep their mineworker union in power at the mines, knowing well that without it, they will shrivel and die. The war has now well and truly started and, should the solution not be soon found, there will [be] much more blood and tears spilt.”

Thirty-four striking miners were slain by police at the Lonmin mine on August 16. This action was endorsed by the NUM, COSATU and the SACP, with Dominic Tweedie of the SACP and COSATU declaring, “We should be happy. The police were admirable.”

Last week, at the ANC-appointed inquiry into the Marikana massacre, it was revealed that in an email exchange with Lonmin management, government ministers and the police, former NUM general secretary-turned millionaire businessman Cyril Ramaphosa had called for “concomitant action” to address the “criminal acts” of the striking miners just 24-hours before the police massacre.

The workers’ “crime” is to reject the NUM and wage a militant struggle to increase their wages. Their actions have exposed the project of “Black economic empowerment”, by which ANC and union representatives have become millionaires, while the exploitation and poverty of the majority of workers have, if anything, grown worse.

In a bid to restore credibility, Vavi had billed the Rustenburg rally as a “fight against the subversive forces threatening NUM’s dominance in the platinum belt”. Its aim was to “strengthen COSATU”. In a bid to placate the workers, Vavi said COSATU and the NUM were demanding the reinstatement of thousands of mineworkers laid off for taking wildcat action.

On Thursday, it was announced that the NUM and the Chamber of Mines had reached agreement on a pay rise with AngloGold Ashanti, Harmony, and Gold Fields. Just ahead of Saturday’s rally, the NUM again announced that Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) had agreed to rehire the 12,000 workers it had dismissed for involvement in a six-week strike.

The announced deals met with an angry response from many strikers, who rightly regarded them as an attempt by management and the union to wind down

their action and then pick them off mine by mine.

The revised pay structure for the gold sector amounts to a maximum rise in monthly salaries of just R500 (\$57.8), under conditions where workers were demanding an increase from their current 4,000 rand salary to R16,000. The agreement does nothing for the thousands of gold miners who have been dismissed.

As for Amplats, the company has given dismissed employees a deadline of Tuesday to return to work, with the paltry offer of a one-off hardship payment of R2,000 (\$230).



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