South African unions, government seek to quell spreading wildcat strikes

Joseph Kishore
8 October 2012

The trade unions and political establishment are seeking desperately to gain control of a spreading wave of strikes that have erupted across South Africa, from the platinum and gold mines to auto manufacturing and transport.

On Friday Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), the world's largest platinum producer, fired 12,000 miners engaged in a wildcat strike, in the first such mass firing since the strike wave began in August. On Saturday, Atlatsa Resources said it was sacking 2,500 striking workers at its Bokoni platinum mine, a joint venture with Amplats.

These moves toward repression coincided with an announcement from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) that it is seeking national negotiations with the mining industry federation. It aims to control the strike wave, which has erupted largely outside of the framework of the official unions. Some 80,000 miners are currently on strike throughout the country.

COSATU, whose leading member union is the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), is closely aligned with the African National Congress (ANC), the main political party of the South African ruling class.

COSATU "will go now to the forefront and will lead the struggle of mineworkers" throughout the industry, general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said on Friday, at a gathering of striking gold miners near Carletonville. He gave nominal support to the demands of the striking workers at Gold Fields, the world's fourth largest gold-mining company. Last week, Vavi began negotiations with the company in an effort to end the three-week-long strike by 13,000 miners.

If the mining sector is to avoid more wildcat strikes, Vavi said, "We have no choice but to open negotiations now." COSATU is set to meet with the Chamber of Mines, the industry organization, today.

Vavi has reason to be concerned. Under the impact of rising class struggles, the organizational domination of COSATU, and through it the ANC, is breaking apart. COSATU's intervention aims not to realize workers' demands, however, but to ensure the mining companies' interests.

The wildcat strikes at Amplats and other mines were animated by deep hostility to the NUM, which was directly complicit in the massacre of 34 striking workers at the Lonmin Marikana platinum mine in August.

In an analysis published Sunday, Reuters writes: "The rules of the game in South Africa's labour market have changed and the new players are workers such as Tshepo Modise and Thulani Soko, wildcat strikers" at Amplats.

Reuters quotes Modise, a 30-year-old machine operator who lives in a slum settlement next to the Amplats mine northwest of Johannesburg: "We no longer want to sit at the table with unions. We've been sabotaged."

Miners throughout the country have been driven into struggle by wretched working conditions and widening social inequality. They have also been encouraged by the results of the struggle at Lonmin where, in an effort to head off a social eruption, the mining company agreed to a 22 percent wage increase last month.

Responding to the mass firings at Amplats, workers representatives said the struggle would be expanded. The company would hire replacements "over our dead bodies," said striking miner Evans Ramokga at a rally on Saturday.

The mass firing came the day after police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at peaceful demonstrators, killing one worker. The worker, identified as 48-year-

© World Socialist Web Site

old Mtshunquleni Qakamba, was apparently struck in the stomach by a rubber bullet.

A representative of the strikers announced that they would file murder charges today against the South African Police Service for the killing.

George Tyobeka, a worker representative, told AFP, “They shot against the people…until they killed one of our colleagues. Employees weren’t fighting, they were just sitting on the hill.”

Meanwhile, 300 workers at Kumba Iron Ore’s Sishen mine have staged a wildcat sit-in, also outside of the control of the NUM.

In addition to the wave of strikes in the mining sector, strikes have also hit transportation, though these remain within the framework of COSATU-member trade unions, at least for the time being.

Some 20,000 truckers in Johannesburg have been on strike for two weeks, severely impacting the transportation of fuel and other commodities in one of the economic centers of the country. Over the weekend, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), which represents some of the transport workers, announced that it is planning a one-day strike of port and rail workers this week.

In addition to SATAWU, the strike involves the Professional Transport and Allied Workers Union (PTAWU) and the Motor Transport Workers Union (MTWU).

The unions have indicated that they are close to an agreement to end the strike, which would cut off the striking miners from a broader mobilization of the working class. “We are positive that we might find a solution because there is a lot at stake,” said MTWU leader Dirk White.

Most of the unions signed on to an agreement with the Road Freight Employers Association (RFEA), the industry group, last week, which included a nominal pay raise of on average 9 percent per year over three years, including 10 percent in the first year. SATAWU—which has raised as a central demand a double-digit yearly pay increase—backed away from the deal.

In an effort to push an end to the strike, the RFEA has sought a court order, and the local media has whipped up allegations of violence on the part of strikers. The threat of direct state intervention to end the strike is being held over workers if they refuse to back down on their demands.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site