

Unions collude in repression as South Africa's strike wave ebbs

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The South African Police Service is waging a brutal campaign of intimidation facilitated by the suffocation of strikes in the mining sector by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

The police and COSATU are working in tandem as agents of the mining companies and the African National Congress (ANC)-led government. Most of the 80,000-100,000 miners involved in strike action in recent weeks have been driven back to work by threats of mass sackings and a sellout organised by COSATU and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Those defying the drive back to work have faced sackings, beatings, arrests and murder.

On Tuesday, at least 2,000 miners at Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), who are continuing a strike that previously involved 12,000, were fired on with rubber bullets and teargas by police. The police arrested 13 strikers. The numbers involved in the strike are difficult to judge, especially given that Amplats said on Thursday it did not yet have sufficient staff to resume operations.

On Wednesday, mine security guards working for Canadian-owned Forbes Coal shot and killed two striking coal miners in KwaZulu-Natal, asserting that this was in response to an attempt to storm the mine's armoury. But even official police accounts note that the miners had been chased into a nearby shantytown before being fired on by the guards.

A mine belonging to Gold Fields remains shut after 8,500 workers were fired for striking. Xstrata has also sacked 400 workers involved in a strike that halted production at its Kroondal chrome mine, the bulk of the pit's 619 workers.

A sit-in by 300 workers over bonus payments at AngloGold Ashanti's Mponeng and TauTona mines, west of Johannesburg, was abandoned after negotiations.

In a highly incendiary move, Lonmin has given unions notice of a major programme of job cuts next year, with a spokesman stating, "We haven't decided how many employees will be impacted."

The platinum mining company owns Marikana, where the police killed 34 miners and injured dozens more on August 16 during a bitter six-week strike. It has been the scene of vicious police repression in the strike's aftermath, against the background of the official Farlam Commission into the killings.

In the aftermath of the massacre, 270 striking miners were initially charged with the murder of their colleagues by police using apartheid-era "common purpose" legislation. They had been tortured and beaten by police, and asked to identify the strike's leaders.

Public outcry forced the withdrawal of the charges, but arrests continue on grounds just as spurious. Of nine recent arrests, the bulk involves leaders of the unofficial strike committee formed against the NUM's collusion with management and murderous attacks on its own

members that reportedly left two dead. The arrests have again targeted those giving evidence before the Farlam inquiry, which has become something of an identity parade for the police to choose their next victim.

The miners' representative, Advocate Dali Mpofu, told the Marikana Commission of Inquiry that six men arrested by the police in the last weeks were tortured while in custody. Four of the men—Zamikhaya Ndude, Sithembele Sohadi, Loyiso Mtsheketshe and Anele Xole—were arrested by scores of armed police while leaving the inquiry and travelling back home (see "Strike leaders arrested following testimony before Marikana massacre inquiry").

"One person said he was beaten up until he soiled himself. Another lost the hearing in his right ear, and another had visible scarring," Mpofu said.

Xolani Nzuza has been charged, without any evidence whatsoever, with the murder of Daluvuyo Bongo, the local secretary of the NUM.

Mpofu denounced what he called a "reign of terror amongst potential witnesses".

Despite an order for their release from custody "without delay" by a magistrate last Friday, the four were immediately rearrested on the instructions of either the national director of public prosecutions or the provincial director.

Mpofu said, "I cannot now, with a straight face, say to other people in Nkaneng or the surrounding areas: 'Oh don't worry, I've organised a combie for you. You can come to the commission next week.' Because they'll say: 'Are you out of your mind? Must I go there and make myself cannon fodder for arrest like so-and-so and so-and-so?'"

Again without evidence, Zenzile Nyenye and Siyakhele Kwazile have also been charged with Bongo's murder.

David Bruce of the *Daily Maverick* interviewed "Bhele" Tholakele Dlunga, a leader of the strike committee, about his treatment by police when he was arrested at 5:30 a.m. on October 25 by five plainclothes officers. They used a black plastic bag to suffocate him while they beat him, before charging him with possession of an unlicensed firearm they had only just found. He was held for six days and repeatedly tortured while being asked the whereabouts of others involved in the Marikana strike.

Zonke, arrested the same day, had been beaten and suffocated to the point where he lost control of his bowels. All charges have been dropped against him, but the 26-year-old was described by Bruce as "a husk of the energetic, bright young man of two weeks before."

The cover-up at the Farlam Commission could hardly be more naked.

The police claim that the only police film of August 16 is that of Lt.-Col. Cornelius Botha, 41 minutes of footage taken from a helicopter showing nothing of significance. It shows police vehicles and people running in single file, apparently taken after the massacre had taken place.

It was only after repeated questioning that Botha “remembered” that “Two stun grenades were shot from the chopper I was in”, contradicting his assertion that he had arrived too late to see what had happened.

Asked how many helicopters were in the air, he said there were four.

In a related development, last week saw the arrest for murder of Angy Peter, an activist who has spent years exposing police abuses in Khayelitsha township outside Cape Town and who was to be a key witness before a commission looking into such abuses. She recently saved the petty thief and police informer she is accused of murdering, Rowan du Preez, from an angry mob.

At the moment, the miners have been led into an impasse. The breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) has no perspective on which to challenge the conspiracy between the NUM, COSATU, the police, the employers and the ANC. For its part, the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), affiliated to the Committee for a Workers International and playing a significant role in the strike committees, is urging workers to reclaim “COSATU’s class and political independence”, secure its departure from the tripartite government and establish “a single trade union centre with a socialist programme.”

It has even urged a “joint trade union and strike committee-led investigation into the Marikana massacre.”

Nothing could be more dangerous than to spread such illusions. Not only did the NUM and COSATU support the police massacre at Marikana, but it was they who called for it to be carried out. The class interests represented by COSATU are those of the bourgeoisie, not in an indirect sense, but because they are capitalists themselves and share in the exploitation of the working class through innumerable Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) schemes.

Former NUM leader Cyril Ramaphosa is President Jacob Zuma’s running mate in his re-election campaign and is backed by his former union. A series of e-mails released to the Farlam inquiry prove that he played a key role in organising the massacre (see “South Africa’s unions use mass sackings and murder to suppress miners”).

Ramaphosa, who is worth 3 billion rand (US\$365 million), owns a 9 percent share in Marikana, but even that is far from the whole picture. A report by Arthur McKay in the October 28 edition of Zimbabwe’s *The Standard* alleges that Ramaphosa pockets 100 rand out of the monthly 500 rand wage of every contract worker employed by Lonmin—worth about US\$18 million a year.

He was paid US\$304 million in cash by the company in 2010 “in a deal backed ultimately by Xstrata”, McKay writes.

Ramaphosa bought a 50.03 percent stake of Lonmin’s BEE partner, Incwala Resources, in 2010, but Lonmin put up the US\$304 million he needed to do so—realised through a share issue in which Xstrata was the key subscriber. A further US\$51 million in credit has been extended to Ramaphosa since then and he is paid US\$50 million to provide Lonmin’s welfare and training services—a total of US\$400 million since 2010.

Zuma and the ANC believe that the support of the COSATU union bureaucracy and their other coalition partners, the South African Communist Party, means they can still sit firmly in the saddle. Zuma’s public comments on Marikana have been dismissive and

arrogant.

He described Marikana to journalists last week as “a mishap”. Speaking to the official opening of the National House of Traditional Leaders in Parliament, Zuma said people should not be pushed by Marikana into thinking that South Africa was returning to an apartheid-like system. He said the Farlam Commission was in the process of discovering the truth about what happened at Marikana. Unlike the “huge cover-up during apartheid times...one incident cannot mean our system is a system that is killing people”, Zuma said.

He continued with a demand that “violence and intimidation must come to an end in those areas where strikes are still continuing,” referring to the miners and not the police and denouncing a resort to “chaos and anarchy”.

In reality, Zuma is sitting on a political and social powder keg. A rise in unemployment to over 25.5 percent was coupled with the release of South Africa’s census figures last week showing that black households still earn six times less than white households, 18 years after the end of apartheid. This significantly underestimates the income gap, given that black households are much larger than white. Estimates are that one miner’s wage sustains 10 people in an extended family. The rate of youth unemployment is 33.7 percent for those aged 25-29 and 27.4 percent for those aged 30-34. Mining accounts for 50 percent of foreign exchange earnings and was the second biggest contributor to job losses last quarter.

Zuma used a meeting of religious groups urging post-apartheid “peace and reconciliation” as yet another occasion to denounce strikes and protests against poverty, declaring, “When workers are on strike, they are very angry, they burn things, they destroy properties. When communities are protesting they actually destroy what they are protesting about that should be delivered to them. That’s an anger that’s abnormal.”

He is currently embroiled in a scandal over his spending US\$28 million of public funds upgrading his rural homestead in KwaZulu-Natal province, one of four residences he owns. Improvements reportedly include a helipad, fencing, bulletproof glass, two AstroTurf soccer fields and elevators serving underground bunkers and the main house. Tens of millions more have been spent on roads in the area.

Addressing a rally on Friday organised by the South African Unemployed Workers Union, he demanded that people stop calling the ANC corrupt. “People are saying this but it is untrue,” he said.



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