

Unrest breaks out again in South Africa's mining sector

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An attack by security guards on South African miners working for Amplats left 13 injured and provoked a one-day protest strike at Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) facilities.

The conflict began as a stand-off between workers at Amplats Siphumelele mine in the Rustenburg area between the Workers Committee and shop stewards of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). It ended with miners being shot with rubber bullets, amid unverified accusations that security guards were attacked with machetes.

Overnight, five billion rand was lost from the platinum counter's value, due to concerns within ruling circles globally of a resurgence of the mass conflict that gripped South Africa's entire platinum, gold, iron and coal mining sector last year. Anglo Gold, the world's third-largest bullion producer, reported a sharp drop in fourth-quarter earnings, to \$7 million, or 2 US cents a share, compared with \$295 million, or 76 cents a share a year earlier, which it blamed on strikes and stoppages.

The 18 February events could easily have escalated into a second Marikana massacre, when police killed 34 striking miners on 16 August 2012.

The showdown took place against a background of an on-going official inquiry into Marikana that has revealed damning evidence of collusion between the NUM and African National Congress, including its top personnel President Jacob Zuma and his recently appointed deputy Cyril Ramaphosa, with the employers and the police.

In addition, mining companies have announced savage cutbacks, with Amplats, the world's biggest producer, planning to cut 400,000 ounces/year of platinum capacity threatening the closure of two mines, four shafts, and 14,000 jobs.

The conflict began when four NUM shop stewards

were confronted by hundreds of workers demanding that they leave their offices on the mine's premises. Support for the NUM has collapsed throughout the industry, with many workers joining the rival Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

The NUM—affiliated to the ANC's governing coalition partner, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)—is no longer recognised as the sole negotiating partner by Implats and Lonmin, South Africa's second and third largest platinum producers. They have declared the AMCU to be the new majority union.

The shop stewards reported for business as usual during company negotiations. This was seen as a provocation. The *Daily Maverick* cites Tebogo Mauwane, an AMCU shop steward, explaining: "The workers just stood outside the NUM offices. They never went in. The mine police came and they just shot at the crowd outside the offices. Those nine people were injured. Someone was very badly injured in the head by a rubber bullet. Everybody thought he was dead. The [security] took an iron rod and placed it in the man's hands, just like they did in Marikana, to make it appear as if he was armed. None of the men were armed as they had just come from shift. Do you know how they search you in the mines? Nobody could have had weapons."

The AMCU is anxious to reach an accommodation with the employers and the government and more than ready to forge a working arrangement with the NUM. AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa did all he could to get the miners back to work and went into negotiations with NUM President Senzeni Zokwana that were announced in an interview on Radio 702.

But more is at stake in this conflict than the ambitions

of rival groups of trade union bureaucrats.

Unrest in South Africa's mines was provoked by the intolerable working conditions faces by miners at a time when their employers are raking in billions and the ANC, South African Communist Party and COSATU's leading figures are making millions through participation in innumerable Black Economic Empowerment programmes.

The *Financial Times* warned this month of a prolonged bout of industrial and social unrest, "spreading from mines to farms against a backdrop of creeping disaffection with government ... for those with half an eye on history, the most turbulent year since multiracial polls brought Nelson Mandela to power in 1994 has raised troubling questions about what is in store for South Africa."

The *FT* drew as its historic parallel the continued existence of "the same racially based system of cheap, migrant labour that [Cecil] Rhodes pioneered at Kimberley in the 19th century. ... The colour of some of the richest South Africans has changed as 'black economic empowerment' saw stakes in lucrative mining stock allocated to the politically well-connected. But South Africa remains two nations in one, and the slow pace with which government is bridging the gap has set them on a fresh collision course."

The social unrest in South Africa's trucking and agricultural sectors that followed the wildcat strikes in the mines has the same root cause: grotesque levels of exploitation and poverty afflicting over half of South Africa's people, almost two decades after the end of the Apartheid system of white minority rule.

Two months of violent strikes in the wine-producing Western Cape by largely non-unionised workers ended only thanks to COSATU getting the workforce back under control. The strikes were prompted by a demand for the daily wage of just 69 rand (\$7.70) to be more than doubled.

The government has now announced that the wage will rise by 50 percent to 105 rand (\$11.85) on March 1. But this paltry concession stands out only because for the most part, the response to workers' demands has been savage repression by the police, and victimisation and sackings by the employers.

Hundreds of striking farmworkers were arrested and three killed in clashes with police. Nosey Pieterse,

secretary general of the Black Workers' Agricultural Sector Union, told the *Guardian* 24 January that farmworkers were dismissed "in truckloads" after the calling off of the latest round of strikes. "In Wolseley, trucks drove into townships and dumped the clothes of farmworkers that had been left behind on the farm," he said.

"In the first 10 years of democracy, the wine industry grew tenfold, from 20m litres output before 1994 to 220m litres. The farmworkers' conditions went the other way. Tenure rights laws were not accepted by the farmers. More than 1 million farmworkers were evicted. They remain slaves on the land of their birth."

The ANC has pledged to meet any future social and industrial unrest with savage repression.

Zuma's State of the Nation speech on 14 February warned of the "lessons from Marikana and other incidents that we cannot allow to recur in our country."

In order to defend "our Constitution", he insisted that people must protest "peacefully and unarmed" and "in a peaceful and orderly manner. ... It is unacceptable when people's rights are violated by perpetrators of violent actions, such as actions that lead to injury and death of persons, damage to property and the destruction of valuable public infrastructure."

The ANC had therefore instructed the "Justice, Crime Prevention and Security (JCPS) Cluster to put measures in place, with immediate effect, to ensure that any incidents of violent protest are acted upon, investigated and prosecuted.

"Courts will be allocated to deal with such cases on a prioritised roll. The law must be enforced and it must be seen to be enforced—fairly, effectively and expeditiously."

References to the constitution notwithstanding, Zuma's speech makes clear that no significant social reforms can be expected of a government that is in the pockets of the transnational corporations and banks. Marikana remains what it was: the harbinger of escalating political and social conflict between the working class and South Africa's corrupt ruling elite.



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