South African Marikana miners stage wildcat strike

Patrick O'Connor
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Thousands of Lonmin platinum mine workers in Marikana, South Africa, have taken strike action in protest over the execution-style killing of an organiser with the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

The striking workers are members of the AMCU, though the union has denied organising the wildcat industrial action. The strike is expected to last until at least Thursday, after a memorial service for the organiser. Workers reportedly turned up to the mine yesterday but refused to go underground. Several hundred blocked roads and rallied at the site of the police massacre carried out last year in August, when 34 striking Marikana miners were murdered.

Workers waved sticks towards nearby police vehicles and sang: "Police are dogs. They must leave". They also chanted: "Down with NUM, we will destroy it today".

The workers are demanding the closure of National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) offices in Marikana. The NUM, affiliated with the ruling African National Congress (ANC), is despised among the mine workers for its long record of enforcing the mining companies' demands and for its role in instigating and defending last year's police massacre. "We are here to demand the removal of NUM from the mine," striking worker Mandisi Dlamini told AFP. "They are no longer the majority union but Lonmin is siding with them. They are using guns to kill our people who are AMCU members and Lonmin is protecting them".

On Saturday, AMCU organiser Mawethu Steven was killed after he was attacked by four men and shot four times with a 9mm pistol. He had been due to testify before a judicial inquiry being held into the Marikana massacre. AMCU officials said that they did not know what Steven was planning to tell the inquiry, but explained that he had received numerous death threats.

Many workers immediately blamed the NUM. Two men connected with the NUM were killed just hours after Steven's murder in what local media reports claimed was a retaliatory attack. The NUM denied responsibility for Steven's death. A union spokesman, Lesiba Seshoka, raised the spectre of another police massacre, declaring: "We are more worried that this may increase violence. This could escalate to what happened at Marikana [last year]".

An official with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Dumisani Dakile, publicly demanded that State Security Minister Siyabonga Cwele again intervene to suppress the workers in Marikana. "They must be able to deploy all necessary resources to make sure that particular area remains calm", Dakile declared.

The main unions and the government are creating the conditions for another massacre. ANC national spokesman Jackson Mthembu declared the government would not permit Marikana "to deteriorate into a bastion of lawlessness". He "urged the law enforcement agencies to act determinedly and with urgency to bring those involved in these crimes to answer before the judicial system".

Earlier this month, at a May Day rally, ANC deputy president and former NUM leader Cyril Ramaphosa declared that the Rustenburg, the main city in South Africa's north west "platinum belt", was "alliance territory, because this is the home of the ANC". This statement is highly provocative coming from Ramaphosa, who played a key role in instigating the Marikana massacre last year. Just before the police killings, the multi-millionaire bureaucrat, who had been a significant shareholder in Lonmin corporation, had demanded "action" against the striking workers.

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The mining companies and the unions are now preparing for negotiations on new two-year industrial agreements. Backed to the hilt by the government and its union allies, mining executives have made clear that they will not countenance workers' demands for significant wage rises and improved conditions. The major mining companies are restructuring their operations in South Africa, cutting costs and laying off workers, in response to the global downturn in mineral commodity prices. Just last week, Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) announced it was sacking 6,000 workers as part of its cost-cutting drive, triggering threats of strike action in its mines.

"Industry officials say the salary discussions, which will affect the gold, platinum and coal sectors and are expected to begin around June, will be among the most crucial for the sector since the end of apartheid 19 years ago", the London-based *Financial Times* commented. "Union representatives, meanwhile, are also likely to find it tougher to sell deals to workers who displayed increasing militancy last year in their demands for better wages and conditions. And companies will enter the talks amid warnings that a number of platinum and gold shafts are already operating at losses or on wafer-thin margins".

Lonmin, the company hit by the Marikana wildcat strike and the world's third-largest platinum producer, had announced new earnings figures on Monday showing a boost in half-yearly profits to $54 million. The company's CEO Simon Scott nevertheless warned that "this is still not an industry that is giving shareholders a huge return". He said the coming wage negotiations posed a "significant challenge". The company's share price plunged by 7 percent yesterday with the news of the latest strike.

Company officials have attempted to intimidate the Marikana miners into ending their industrial action. A memo sent by management to the workforce described the strike as "illegal" and said that a failure to immediately return to work would lead to more sackings and would "severely impact the viability of Lonmin and will put your work and the sustainability of your family at risk".

The AMCU, recently recognised as the majority union in South Africa's platinum mines, is eager to demonstrate its credentials in accommodating the demands of the employers and the government.

A comment on the online South African news outlet *Daily Maverick* noted that "in the eye of the probable future storm is AMCU's leader, Joseph Mathunjwa himself". It explained: "The NUM can control its members. It can arrange to have a certain number of people at a certain spot for a certain amount of time. It can also tell them to disperse, and they will. Mathunjwa ... uhm, can't … So he's going to resort to theatre. As independent labour analyst Gavin Brown puts it, 'the real question here, is how do you ventilate all the steam on the shop floor without Armageddon?' He suggests Mathunjwa may use a bit of theatre. They'll be tough talking, promises that are made, carefully, and then the back-tracking at the last minute … And so gentle reader, if you are inclined to kind thoughts, perhaps the person you need to spare one for, is Joseph Mathunjwa. He's going to need it".

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