

South African miners mount new wave of wildcat strikes

Thomas Gaist
17 May 2013

A new strike wave is shaking South Africa's mines, with the second strike this week ready to begin yesterday evening at Anglo American Platinum's (Amplat) Rustenburg site.

Representatives of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) announced that as of Thursday evening, miners will refuse to go underground, as the company prepares to announce over 6,000 layoffs. The company had previously planned 14,000 layoffs, but reduced the number in an effort to quell growing unrest among the miners.

"Workers won't go underground tonight," said Mametlwe Sebei, who added that the strike was organized by miners independently of the unions.

Lonmin miners resumed work on Thursday after a two-day wildcat strike, with 83 percent turning up for the night shift, according to company spokeswoman Sue Vay. The trigger for the most recent Lonmin strike was reportedly the killing of an AMCU official in a local tavern. On Saturday, 4 gunmen shot the AMCU's regional manager Steve Khululekile, in what media have described as a mafia-style killing.

Lonmin workers demanded that representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leave their Marikana office, amid suspicions that the NUM might have ordered Khululekile's murder as the NUM and AMCU battle for control of the mine's union positions.

There is deep hostility among the miners toward the NUM. "We don't want NUM," one miner bluntly told Reuters on Tuesday, declining to give his name. Miners raised demands for the total expulsion of the NUM from the mine.

Lonmin workers were ordered back to work by AMCU president Joseph Mathunjwa, based on empty promises of a favorable settlement with the company, to be negotiated through an "independent mediator."

"There are channels to be followed ... go back to work so that your enemies will not take advantage of this situation," Mathunjwa told the workers. He added that in the coming period, his "journey will be determined by Jesus Christ."

The AMCU's push for an end to the wildcat strike when none of the workers' broader demands have been met belies the union's attempt to posture as a "militant" and "independent" force opposed to the NUM.

Despite the AMCU's attempts to present itself as an alternative to NUM, from which it emerged in 1998, it is equally tied to the capitalist system. As the South African miners' struggles have repeatedly shown, every serious struggle inevitably brings the working class into conflict with the union bureaucracy, which defends the interests of the employers and the South African state. The only way forward is a struggle waged independently of and against the unions.

This is the key lesson of last August's Marikana massacre, when South African police, backed by the NUM, the South African Communist Party, and the ruling African National Congress (ANC), massacred 34 striking Lonmin miners. This massacre triggered a long and bitter strike wave throughout the South African mining industry and broader sections of the working class.

South African miners were striking against backbreaking, dangerous working conditions under which they extract valuable precious metals and receive slave wages. They live in squalid housing provided by the employers. The miners demanded a doubling of their wages to \$800-1000 per month. The NUM resorted to calling in police and backing a police massacre of strikers in order to block a struggle for these demands, which it opposed.

None of the essential demands or grievances of the

workers have been met since then. “It is too little for us for the kind of work we do. I plant dynamite, and there are hanging walls inside the mines. We can die anytime. We know the company makes a lot of money from the work we do,” says Ayanda Ndabeni, a miner.

On Monday, a Lonmin rock drill operator Lungani Mabutyana, 27, hung himself near the site of the August 2012 massacre of 34 striking miners by ANC security forces. Mabutyana is the 7th worker to commit suicide this year, which mine researcher David van Wyk attributes to the “horror of last’s year violence” and its impact upon the community. Mabutyana was in the crowd of strikers when security forces opened fire.

“These guys are still going through a lot of trauma from the Marikana massacre,” Mr. Van Wyk said. “The scale of the violence has been of a magnitude which they just weren’t able to comprehend. The whole society has been traumatized.”

The South African bourgeoisie is terrified of renewed strike activity. The African National Congress (ANC) cabinet is “extremely, extremely concerned” about the latest unrest, said Environment Minister Edna Molewa.

“We are more worried that this may increase violence,” said Lesiba Seshoka, a spokesman for NUM. “This could escalate to what happened at Marikana.”

Financial analysts are concerned that repeated wildcat strikes call into question the unions’ capacity to suppress workers struggles in South Africa in the interests of bankers’ profits. “The NUM is publicly calling for calm, but internally we think it is very alarmed at the further erosion of its position...its control over more localized groupings of members is unclear,” stated mining analyst Peter Attard Montalto.

“Strikes at the Medupi power station building site remain endemic too,” Montalto continued. “Contagion in the wider economy remains more of a risk now than it was last year because of the timing of the wage round. Police distrust remains very high because of evidence emerging at the Marikana commission into the tragedy of last year...This is therefore only the beginning, in our view.”

The South African bourgeoisie is boosting its repressive powers in anticipation of class conflict—cynically draping its preparation for more violent repression of the miners under empty “democratic” rhetoric.

State Security Minister Siyabonga Cwele stated: “The

whole security cluster is increasing its capacity to focus on this scourge. We now have a plan and are ready to deploy the full capacity of the democratic state to identify, prevent or arrest and swiftly prosecute those who undermine our Bill of Rights by engaging in acts of violence.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact