

Security forces fire rubber bullets at striking South African miners

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Police fired volleys of rubber bullets at striking South African miners at a mine owned by Lanxess Chrome Mining Ltd on Tuesday, near the city of Rustenburg. Some 500 miners had assembled at daybreak, taking action without union approval. At least 10 miners were hospitalized, and police forces subsequently took control of the mine.

The shooting comes amid a new wave of workers' militancy after last year's massacre of 34 miners at Marikana, which led to an upsurge of strikes throughout South Africa. The massacre was carried out by security forces, with the full backing of the African National Congress (ANC) government and the powerful National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

A Lanxess spokeswoman justified the use of rubber bullets—which are in fact normal rounds with a rubber covering, capable of inflicting bone fractures, internal organ damage, and even death—on the basis of self-defense: “They [the miners] started throwing stones at our security guards and my understanding is that the security guards shot rubber bullets, not live ammunition, in self-defense.”

The Lanxess employees had been on a wildcat strike since May 16.

The NUM issued statements backing the police crackdown on the strikers. “There is a court order in terms of where strikes are supposed to stop. ... They crossed the line, and came closer to the entrance at the mine and the mine security reacted by firing rubber bullets,” claimed NUM coordinator Mxhasi Sithethi.

South Africa's mining sector has seen periodic upsurges of strike struggles over the past months. Last week, a wildcat strike at Lonmin was ended after two days, and after the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), a splinter union, barely succeeded in organizing a return to work amid a

threatened strike at Amplats. Previously, an Amplats mine near Rustenburg saw the fatal shooting of 5 miners on February 18.

South Africa's ruling class is seeking to forge an agreement with the country's major unions to restore stability. South African Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan issued urgent calls on Tuesday for united action by the mining corporations, labor unions, and South African state to bring an end to the miners' militancy.

“This is going to require quite spectacular leadership from all sides, not just from the labor unions,” Gordhan said. “It requires a shift,” he continued, “not in the interests of industry only but also in the interests of the country.”

Along similar lines, Labor Minister Mildred Oliphant referred to the need for ongoing talks to conclude a “new centralized bargaining arrangement in the platinum sector.”

The South African ruling elite is seeking to contain the fallout from last year's Marikana massacre. Major General Charl Annandale, who commanded the security forces that fired upon the miners at Marikana, attempted to apologize for the killings during testimony on Wednesday, prompting relatives of the dead to walk out of the proceedings.

In a report delivered to the NUM on May 23, ANC representative Zwelini Mkhize condemned wildcat strikes and demanded that corporations not give in to any workers' demands: “The mining companies must not be allowed to give in to scare tactics and make settlements on basis of intimidation and settle on unprincipled and unreasonable demands for fear of vigilante tactics. The lesson from Marikana is that government, mining companies and labour unions must work together and cooperate to ensure that the miners

are rewarded appropriately for their labour.”

Speaking on Thursday, President Zuma claimed that wildcat strikes harm the interests of poor and marginalized South Africans. Speaking to the National House of Traditional Leaders in Cape Town, Zuma denounced wildcat strikes for undermining the economy. “We could impoverish our country without realizing, when we think we are trying to correct the situation,” he said.

South Africa is gripped by social contradictions which are unresolvable under capitalism. The interests of the South African working class are directly and irreconcilably opposed to those of the capitalist class and its loyal servants in the union bureaucracy, as is made clear by the repeated use of deadly violence against the working class.

The NUM has cynically advanced demands for wage increases, hoping to shore up its credibility in the eyes of its members and on that basis to regain a measure of control over workers’ struggles, in order to suppress them. The wage increase they are demanding (to \$750 per month) has been rapidly denounced by the media and business circles who are working with the NUM as aggressive and unreasonable. All these forces will work together to sabotage any struggle for these demands.

The role of “alternative” unions has been exposed by the action of the AMCU to suppress the Amplats strike. It hopes to have better control over workers’ struggles than the NUM, in order to defend the same basic institutions supported by the NUM: the profit interests of the mining corporations, the ANC regime, and through all of these, capitalist rule. Its central fear is that working class struggles will erupt and prevent it from establishing its hold over the lucrative positions that in an earlier period were largely controlled by the NUM.



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