

ANC, South African mining companies seek to crush new round of strikes

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As strikes erupt in industries across South Africa, the country's ruling elite is moving to solidify the military and legal framework for mass repression against the working class.

Signaling the determination of the employers to crush any further "illegal" strikes, Glencore Xstrata, an Anglo-Swiss company mining company with major operations in South Africa, fired 1,000 miners early this week for participating in wildcat actions.

The strikes involved a total of 1,500 miners, beginning at Glencore's Helena site and spreading to the Thorncliffe and Magareng mines.

The strikes at Glencore are the latest in a series of wildcat actions that rocked South Africa's mining sector during the past month. More than 10,000 South African clothing workers began striking in KwaZulu-Natal province on May 21.

On the same day, miners at a mine owned by Lanxess Chrome Mining Ltd. were put down with volleys of rubber-coated bullets. A wildcat strike at Lonmin in mid-May lasted for two days before the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) organized a return to work.

"The strikes are popping up everywhere—it is no longer platinum, or coal or chrome, it is everywhere," said an industry executive with interests in South Africa. "The wildcat strikes are spreading."

The miners work in some of the most dangerous, physically demanding environments in the world. In return, they receive poverty wages (averaging US\$300-US\$500 dollars per month), while their employers rake in billions of dollars. Policing this arrangement on behalf of international and South African capital are the ANC, COSATU and South African Communist Party (SACP) leaderships, who are handsomely paid for their services.

In response to the rising strike wave, South African leaders have raised the possibility that a "peacekeeping" force will be deployed throughout the country's mines.

In other words, the methods that were revealed at last year's massacre of striking miners at Marikana—the unrestrained use of automatic weapons against workers who resist—are to be institutionalized and implemented across the entire country.

"If there is a need to deploy that peacekeeping force, we have to do so in the mining sector as a whole," said Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant.

Lonmin has ramped up the private security presence around its mining facilities. "There is an increased police presence in the area and Lonmin itself has significantly increased the amount of security personnel we have on the property," said Mark Munroe, executive vice president for mining.

Simultaneously, efforts are under way to rally privileged middle class layers, which form the political base for South Africa's Stalinist and pseudo-left organizations, in advance of mass repression against the workers.

Peter Leon, head of Africa mining and energy projects at the law firm Webber Wentzel, described this project as an "overarching social compact."

The notion that a new "social compact" is being offered by the butchers of Marikana is a contemptible fraud. In reality, preparations are well advanced to deploy brutal violence against struggles by impoverished South African workers, in defense of the privileged minority who dominate society in that country and internationally.

"All stakeholders, government, management in the mining sector, trade union movement in particular should talk and find a way to deal with this matter,"

said President Jacob Zuma, speaking in Tokyo.

As Zuma made clear in his statement, South Africa's ruling classes have been closely coordinating with the unions for years to prepare for repression against workers.

"We think we have the capacity to, in fact, discuss and agree," said the South African president. "When the economic meltdown began in 2008, we met social partners and actually agreed how to respond to that situation," he said. "I think South African stakeholders have to respond in that way."

Zuma's government is a bought-and-paid-for enforcer of the interests of transnational capital. In the wake of the Marikana massacre of 2012, the ANC re-elected Zuma as president and elected Cyril Ramaphosa, former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), as deputy president, showing its gratitude to the butchers who presided over the mass killing of miners.

The AMCU threatened on Thursday to initiate a new strike action at platinum miner Lonmin next week if it was not recognized as the majority union at the mine, saying it would meet with ANC representatives to cut a deal. The threat illustrates the AMCU's deeply political practice, based on using the working class as a bargaining chip in its efforts to secure greater influence for its officials within the corrupt milieu of the South African labor bureaucracy.

Since breaking away from the NUM in 1998, the "militant" AMCU has become increasingly powerful, taking advantage of widespread hatred among workers against the NUM. AMCU membership doubled in the past year, as miners left the NUM, which stood shoulder to shoulder with the ANC during the massacre of 34 miners at Marikana.

Nevertheless, the AMCU has also repeatedly demonstrated its hostility to working class struggles and to a movement of the working class against the reactionary ANC government, most recently by organizing the return to work at Lonmin without workers' demands being met.

The *Financial Mail* reported last week, "[AMCU president] Mr Mathunjwa said that neither the government nor the industry should fear bargaining negotiations with AMCU, which would engage responsibly and strive to reach an agreement."



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