South African miners battle with police as unions negotiate with mine bosses

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South African police fired on striking Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) miners with rubber bullets, stun grenades, teargas, and water cannons Monday morning after the workers defied an ultimatum to return to work.

Amplats had demanded that 12,000 miners at the site in Rustenburg, who had been suspended earlier in the month in retaliation for participating in a wildcat strike, return to work or face permanent sacking, as part of a deal negotiated by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and two other unions.

Instead, the miners launched a wildcat strike, which quickly took on an insurgent character, according to an AFP report. “We are six weeks on strike, we can’t go back to work empty-handed,” workers’ representative Siphamandla Makhanya told AFP.

The striking miners fought running battles with police forces and torched a power station near the Amplats mine in Rustenburg. Hundreds of workers set up barricades to block government attempts to regain control of the mining site.

“It seems as if it’s a war between the employees and the police,” said Lazarus Khosa, a striking worker.

South Africa’s mining sector has been rocked by a series of wildcat strikes over the past months. The Associated Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and NUM have played the crucial role in ending the strikes and demobilizing the workers.

In May, security forces fired rubber bullets at striking chromium miners employed by Lanxess Mining Ltd., also in Rustenburg, sending at least 10 to the hospital. The NUM quickly issued a statement defending the police crackdown, with NUM coordinator Mxhasi Sithethi stating: “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.”

Another wildcat strike at Lonmin in mid-May lasted for two days before the AMCU organized a return to work. “There are channels to be followed ... go back to work,” Mathunjwa told the workers, adding that his “journey will be determined by Jesus Christ.”

Last week, Zuma promised aggressive measures to clamp down on labor militancy in the mining sector. President Jacob Zuma and the African National Congress (ANC) have worked relentlessly with the mining companies and the union bureaucracies to maintain the poverty level wages of the miners.

“Our law-enforcement agencies have been instructed not to tolerate those who commit crime in the name of labor relations,” Zuma said, speaking in Cape Town. “They will face the full might of the law.”

“It is not in the interest of the country to have a tense labor relations environment which is characterized by a weakening of collective bargaining mechanisms, illegal wildcat strikes, violent protests and loss of life,” Zuma added.

As the class struggle intensifies in South Africa, the country’s ruling elite is seeking arrangements to block the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

On Friday, business, government, and union leaders, including the CEO of Anglo American Platinum and representatives from the NUM and AMCU, met to hammer out a “sustainable mining framework,” which they aim to ratify by June 26 under the supervision of Zuma’s deputy president, Kgalema Motlanthe.

The mining framework lays out a strategic plan to neutralize and strangle any effective resistance in the working class to the domination of big business and the unions. “We as government, labor and business will work together to ensure the sustainability of the mining

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sector for the future of our country and our people," the document reads.

The document emphasizes the need for the unions to cooperate in maintaining "stability" and "rule of law," and calls for regular meeting between government, organized labor, and business to coordinate their strategy and "to address blockages and new issues as they arise."

The framework demands the cooperation of unions with government repression against wildcat strikes, stating that unions must "respect the rights of employers to take the necessary steps, within the confines of the law, against workers involved in unprotected strike action, violence and intimidation."

In other words, the unions will once again stand together with the state when it becomes necessary to crush "illegal" wildcat strikes with violent repression. This is the real content of the framework's plan to "improve internal security measures and consistently implement them at workplaces."

As was clearly demonstrated at Marikana in August of 2012, when Zuma's ANC government slaughtered 34 impoverished miners for daring to demand a modest wage increase, the South African state and the unions are the true purveyors of violence and intimation in the country.

The supposedly "militant" AMCU attended the June 14 sustainable framework talks, and is preparing its own contributions to the framework for June 26, when ratification will likely occur. The breakaway union, which has gained a following as a result of its opposition to the NUM, has proven itself a loyal defender of the blood-drenched Zuma regime and the profit interests of the mining corporations.

According to a Reuters report of June 10, AMCU leader Joseph Mathunjwa said recently after meeting with a slate of financiers that, "investors should not fear him."

"What they [the investors] have read in the papers portrays AMCU as a monster. After that meeting they came out with different thoughts," Mathunjwa said.

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