

South African miners mark one year since Marikana massacre

Bill Van Auken
19 August 2013

Thousands of South African platinum miners gathered Friday on the hill near the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana in the country's North West province where 34 of their comrades died in a hail of police bullets on August 16, 2012.

The anniversary has been accompanied by rhetoric from within the country's ruling establishment and media about the need for "reconciliation" and "healing the wounds" of the bloodiest act of repression since the end of apartheid two decades ago. But the ceremony in Marikana only underscored the continued deepening of the political and social polarization that the massacre brought violently to the attention of the country and the entire world.

The government, the ruling African National Congress, its affiliated trade union confederation, COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the ANC-aligned NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) were all conspicuously absent from the ceremony, with seats on the platform set aside for government ministers empty.

In announcing the boycott of the memorial, the African National Congress for the North West province condemned its organizers as "an illegitimate team" which "the ANC does not recognize." On the day of the commemoration, the ANC's headquarters in Johannesburg tried to distance itself from this arrogant declaration, calling the provincial leadership's "callous remarks ... extremely unfortunate."

The truth is that the government, the ruling party and the unions that support them feared that they would come under attack from the miners if they were to show their faces as all of them bear direct responsibility for the bloodbath unleashed a year ago.

The miners heard a demagogic speech by Julius Malema, the former ANC youth leader who was

expelled from the ruling party last year. Malema exploited the occasion to launch his new political party, dubbed the Economic Freedom Fighters.

The former youth leader, who has amassed a multi-million-dollar personal fortune through the ANC's so-called "black economic empowerment" programs and ties to both foreign and domestic capital, denounced the British-based Lonmin mining corporation and ANC President Jacob Zuma for having "blood on their hands," insisting, "We cannot talk of peace." Malema represents some of the most rapacious elements in the emerging black South African bourgeoisie, who are not adverse to exploiting class and political tensions to further their own political and economic ambitions.

Also speaking was Joseph Mathunjwa, president of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), which led last year's strike in the face of the violent opposition of the company, the government and the NUM, which was then recognized as the majority union at the mine.

Mathunjwa vowed to call a new strike renewing last year's demand for a 12,500 Rand ((\$1,260) monthly wage. Many miners are currently paid barely a third that amount. "We're not free," he said. "This is the start of the revolution."

While the AMCU has more than doubled in size over the last year thanks to the explosive anger of miners toward the government-aligned NUM, its reputation for militancy has also begun to suffer. Mathunjwa has vowed that the break-away union will act as a "responsible" bargaining partner for the transnational mining companies, and last May he organized a return to work by wildcatting Lonmin miners without their demands being met.

Just two days before the anniversary, Lonmin agreed to the AMCU's demand that it be recognized as the

majority union at the mine, supplanting the NUM. Part of the deal included a commitment by the AMCU to abide by South Africa's Labor Relations Act, which bars wildcat strikes.

This deal was undoubtedly linked to the invitation to the company itself to play a role in the commemoration ceremony, which it helped finance. Lonmin sent its newly appointed black African CEO Ben Magara (who Mathunjwa recently declared to be "part of the working class"). "We will never replace your loved ones and I say we are truly sorry for that," he told the crowd. Lonmin had previously denounced the murdered miners as "criminals."

Miners attending the memorial ceremony insisted that over the past year conditions have only worsened in the mine as well as in the shanty town where they live without adequate electricity, water or sewage facilities.

"We are still waiting for the changes," Malusi King Danga, a 28-year-old Lonmin worker, told the Reuters news agency. "It's like we were killed for nothing, like we were jailed and beaten up for nothing. The mines and the money it brings to the country are more important than the miners who live in shacks."

Bongani, a rock-drill operator with nine years in the Lonmin mine, told the BBC: "Nothing has changed here, in fact things have gotten worse. We are fearful to even miss work for a day, let alone strike because we might be suspended. Things are much harder now than they were before the strike."

While last year's strike was settled on the basis of a 22 percent wage increase, many of the miners said that they had yet to see any raise.

Not one person has been held accountable for the Marikana massacre. A commission set up by Zuma has as yet failed to interview any of the police directly involved in the shootings or to review forensic evidence that the miners' lawyers say proves the victims were shot in the back as they tried to flee a police firing squad.

The panel's proceedings, which are scheduled to resume on Monday, have been hampered by a lack of funding and the inability of the miners and their families to continue attending the sessions because of a lack of financial support.

Police officials have been given the largest block of time to testify, defending their actions and even calling into question whether the miners were killed by police

bullets—something that people across South Africa and around the world saw on their television screens.

What evidence has been given by workers and union officials points to the massacre having been carried out in cold blood, as opposed to the police alibi of acting in self-defense.

The Cape Town *Sunday Independent* cited the testimony of one of the wounded miners, Mzoxolo Magidiwana, who told the commission that "the miners were trying to run away when they saw barbed wire being rolled out," blocking their escape route. When they turned to flee in another direction, they ran directly into a waiting firing line of policemen armed with automatic weapons. Magidiwana, who was shot ten times, said most of the bullets hit him after he had already fallen to the ground.

Police Commander-General William Mpmembe confirmed, according to the *Independent*, "that the use of live ammunition in dispersing the protesters was foreseen and authorized."

The *Independent* lamented, "One unfortunate consequence of the commission, and its slowness, is that it has stymied much-needed public discussion and reflection on the massacre, and its consequences for the tattered South African dream of a healing society committed to justice and equality."

What the Marikana massacre laid bare is that the social chasm separating the working class from the country's ruling establishment—which now includes a layer of black officials, corporate executives and millionaires—has only widened in the nearly two decades since the end of apartheid and the assumption of power by the ANC.

With their murderous suppression of the miners' struggles, the ANC and the official trade unions have made it clear that the struggle for justice and equality can be prosecuted only by the working class independently of and against these organizations, which are committed to defending the profit interests of transnational and South African capital.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)