

# Industrial strikes spread in South Africa

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3 September 2013

Significant sections of South Africa's industrial working class are currently on strike, with more potential strikes set to begin in the coming days and weeks.

As of Monday, 90,000 construction sector workers were on a strike that began last week, and 72,000 car dealership and petrol station workers were preparing to go on strike starting September 9. South African Airways technicians also began a strike last Monday.

South African gold miners affiliated with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) are ready to strike this week, according to numerous media reports. Sites operated by AngloGold Ashanti, Gold Fields and Harmony will likely be among those impacted. Taking into account looming actions in the textile, petrol, and mining sectors, more than 200,000 additional South African workers may be on strike by this time next week, according to *Reuters*.

While the mining sector has been at the center of the past year's labor turmoil, major actions are breaking out in other sectors. Two weeks ago, tens of thousands of South African auto manufacturing workers downed tools, paralyzing auto plants in Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Durban and East London.

According to *Reuters*, the auto strike is costing \$60 million per day and impacting the operations of major firms such as Toyota, Ford and BMW. The auto workers' demands include a 14 percent wage increase and a housing subsidy equivalent to about \$70 dollars. The employers originally offered a 6 to 8 percent wage increase. Last week, the auto workers rejected a new offer including a 10 percent wage increase.

The past year has seen a sharp escalation of class tensions in the country, as violent confrontations have broken out between workers, who have launched repeated and sustained wildcat strikes, and the state security forces backed by the unions and the African

National Congress (ANC).

In the mining sector alone, more than 60 have been killed during the past year as a result of such clashes, including the massacre of 34 South African miners by security forces during the Marikana miners' strike of August 2012. The massacre of workers was supported by the ANC and the COSATU trade union federation, including the NUM.

The intensification of the class struggle in South Africa is being fueled by savage attacks on the working class by the companies, which are seeking to cut costs through mass sackings. Anglo American Platinum is seeking to push through 3,300 layoffs next month and has threatened to shut down a number of its operations in South Africa, saying they are no longer profitable.

South Africa's unions are collaborating with the employers to dissipate opposition and contain the struggles that are emerging in the working class. The unions hope the strikes will let off steam, while keeping workers' struggles from developing into a political conflict with the ANC government.

Joseph Mathunjwa, president of the AMCU, which has presented itself as a more radical union, openly acknowledged while speaking to *Reuters* Monday that the unions are seeking to generate more favorable conditions for negotiations with the companies. "A strike is not what we are after, we are being pushed into a corner," he complained.

Mathunjwa's comment makes clear that the real aim of his strike threats is to improve the balance of forces between the unions and the mining bosses, without resorting to strike action if possible.

National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (NUMSA) spokesman Castro Ngobese sought to reassure the employers that his union is a reliable partner of South African capital. "We are not a strike-frenzy union, we support the process of constructive negotiating." By "constructive negotiating," Ngobese

means conspiring with the South African ruling elite against the working class.

In an article Monday, “Mine unions, bosses in war of words before South Africa gold strike,” *Reuters* advanced the claim, endlessly repeated in the media, that the wildcat strikes which have rocked South Africa during the past year were produced by “a turf war between the NUM and AMCU.”

This explanation serves to mask the real driving forces behind the unrest, particularly the explosive growth of social inequality. South Africa consistently ranks among the most unequal societies in the world.

Over the past two decades, the African National Congress has emerged as the main bulwark of capitalist rule in South Africa, run by black millionaires who slaughter impoverished black miners on behalf of American and European imperialism. By its own political trajectory, the iconic party of black nationalism has proven the bankruptcy of all parties based on nationalist programs.

The ANC has the full support of the COSATU trade union federation, including the NUM. The crucial question, therefore, remains the building of a revolutionary leadership within the South African working class that is capable of unifying the workers in opposition to the trade unions and the government. In the absence of such a leadership, strikes will inevitably be isolated and strangled with the collaboration of the unions.



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