

Union shuts down South African gold miners' strike after less than 3 days

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Tens of thousands of South African gold miners have returned to work after three days of strike action. The end of the gold miners' strike is yet another betrayal of the South African working class by the trade unions, in this case the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Associated Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

As with every previous strike, the NUM has sought to pack in the strike as quickly as possible, while posing as a defender of workers' interests. For its part, the AMCU instructed its members to continue working throughout the gold miners' strike. AMCU-dominated AngloGold and Harmony mines continued to operate normally this week. Such actions show the real orientation of the "militant" AMCU, which is hostile to the working class and fears that even limited strike actions could develop momentum and move beyond the control of the unions.

The direct impetus for the strike was the breakdown of wage negotiations. South Africa's Chamber of Mines, which represents the collective interests of the mining companies, initially offered the gold miners a 6.5 percent wage increase. Rejecting this meager offer, which is only 0.2 percentage points above the rate of inflation as of July 2013, 80,000 gold miners in South Africa downed tools on Tuesday and continued strike action for three days. Major gold producers, including Sibanye, AngloGold Ashanti, Gold Fields, Harmony Gold, saw production impacted by the strike.

The miners' strike came amidst major actions in other industrial sectors, including a strike by 90,000 construction workers and 30,000 auto manufacturing workers. Reports have also emerged of power station employees shutting off power switches in protest. The circumstances exist for a powerful united struggle of the entire South African working class, which the

unions, in collaboration with the state, are determined to avoid.

From the beginning, the NUM expressed a desire to come to terms with the companies and the state, while playing the race card to divert attention from the class issues at stake.

"The NUM has noted the government's wishes that industrial action be avoided and dares the state to explain which side it is on," NUM spokesperson Lesiba Seshoka said in a statement. "The union is aware of the devastating impact industrial action would have on the economy, which is largely a white man's economy with no benefits for poor black mineworkers."

In fact, the government is fully on the side of the corporations, and the NUM is on the side of the government. Seshoka's words are intended to reassure the South African ruling elite that the NUM remains fully in their camp and is eager to find an arrangement that will contain the rising militancy of the miners.

Prior to the strike, the NUM had demanded an increase of 33 percent beyond the new pay level, but after only three days the union has accepted the bosses' offer. According to *Bloomberg*, most miners have followed the instruction of the NUM and returned to work on the basis of the 7.5 and 8 percent raises proposed by the mining corporations. It is clear that the NUM was not serious about its initial demand, which was made in the attempt to establish credibility among the workers.

The contempt of the employers for the working class was evident in the statement from Chamber of Mines negotiator Elize Strydom, who said that the 8 percent wage deal is "a little more than employers would have preferred." The gold miners currently receive around 5,000 rand per month, which is barely enough to cover rudimentary living expenses in South Africa. The 8

percent wage increase offered by the bosses and promoted by the NUM as an acceptable solution is barely above the rate of inflation.

That the mining companies views such a minuscule wage hike as “more than they would prefer” illustrates their unshakeable determination not to yield any ground in the face of workers’ militancy as the world economy passes through a fifth year of economic crisis.

The continued eruption of social conflict has South African leaders sounding increasingly desperate. President Jacob Zuma, a man who bears enormous responsibility for last August’s slaughter at Marikana, issued the usual calls for conciliation and cooperation between capital and labor: “We just appeal that the two parties must find one another because a protracted strike is not helpful to the country nor to the industry itself. The strike hurts both sides. Both sides must be ready to give and to take as well.”

Of course, Zuma knows full well that the interests of South African capital and the South African proletariat are completely opposed. His blood-stained ANC regime has used lethal force against the workers in defense of the companies, and will not hesitate to do so again. In this, the ANC can count on the support of South Africa’s trade unions.



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