

South African unions vie for control of militant workers

Part two

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21 February 2014

This is the conclusion of a two-part comment on the manoeuvres of South Africa's trade unions to contain growing militancy in the working class. Part one was posted February 20.

For many workers, the term “trade union” can invoke the image of an organ—even if it is dominated by a privileged bureaucracy that refuses to fundamentally challenge capitalism—through which workers can wrest concessions from the employers.

This image, however, bears no relation to present reality. Over time the unions have increasingly assumed the role of labour managers on behalf of the employers and the government. Due to the impact of globalised production, this process of corporatist transformation of the old nationally-based labour bureaucracies has assumed a finished form.

The bourgeoisie relentlessly demands from the trade union leaders a universal levelling down of the living standards of the working class in the name of global competitiveness. In these circumstances, securing even limited concessions for their members has given way to a constant process of surrendering previously-won gains, the suppression of the class struggle, and one betrayal after another when strikes cannot be prevented.

The net result has been a pronounced deterioration of the social position of the working class in every country, measured above all in an absolute decline in the share of GDP that goes to labour. At the same time, the social gulf between the trade union bureaucracy and the working class has assumed unprecedented dimensions. This is a global phenomenon, but in South Africa it has taken extreme expression. In the aftermath of the fall of apartheid, South African capitalists knew that their brutal system of exploitation would lead to revolution unless there were examples of black capitalists whom they could hold up as role models that the masses could one day hope to emulate. This was the real function of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). For most blacks, the BEE policies,

which have so nicely served capitalists, including now fabulously wealthy “trade unionists,” are tantamount to immiseration and not empowerment.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the junior partner of the capitalist elite, sold out strike after strike in its ever-growing alignment with the ANC government's pro-business agenda. This alignment continued in the prelude to the police massacre at Marikana, as set out in an article in the *Daily Maverick* by Jared Sacks. He reports that rock drill operators, the lowest-paid workers at the Lonmin mine, approached their NUM representatives for support in going on strike. The NUM officials responded by denouncing the workers.

Workers took matters into their own hands by directly going to Lonmin management offices on August 10, 2012, but were turned back by a Lonmin official who fetched an NUM representative—who also would have nothing to do with them. Unarmed workers marched to the NUM's offices in Wonderkop to present the bureaucrats with a memorandum on August 11. NUM officials at the office literally came out with guns blazing, killing two workers in the group.

It was then that workers first armed themselves and reprisal killings began. Rank-and-file disaffection with the NUM and the privileges of shop stewards would later encourage the opportunistic growth of the new union AMCU, with its intimations of responding to increased worker militancy.

The events at the Lonmin mine in Marikana on August 16, 2012 were a watershed from which there is no going back. Here the world saw, for the first time, the results of years of integration of the trade union bureaucrats into the state apparatus and the bourgeoisie itself.

Following days of unrest, striking miners occupied a hillock on public land, refusing to descend until mine management discussed wages with them. South African Police Service (SAPS) officers then corralled the miners,

laying out lengths of razor wire around them and using armoured vehicles to press them together. When a group finally tried to break through (other reports say they were running from live fire coming from a helicopter) the police line opened fire with assault rifles, mowing down 34 in a scene recalling the worst apartheid-era repression.

Most of the killing, however, took place away from the cameras of the world's media organisations when armoured vehicles rode over miners and police combed a rocky outcrop in the area known as Small Koppie. There they cornered miners singly or in twos and threes, cold-bloodedly assassinating them although arrest was feasible.

The SAPS carried out this atrocity with the full support of the Zuma government. To a large extent, they did this at the behest, most proximately, of Cyril Ramaphosa and NUM General Secretary Frans Baleni.

Ramaphosa, the former NUM leader, was by then a rand billionaire sitting on Lonmin's board of directors, owning fully 9 percent of Marikana through a controlling stake in Lonmin's Black Economic Empowerment partner, Incwala Resources, for which he was pocketing about US\$18 million a year. He had earlier warned Mining and Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu that her lack of engagement did not go down well with international capital. In an email to Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega, Ramaphosa denounced strikers as "dastardly criminals" deserving harsh reprisal.

Baleni's calculations were possibly predicated on the enormous gains in membership that AMCU had won at the NUM's expense. The process of AMCU displacing the NUM as the official workers' representation was already advanced at several workplaces. Little wonder that Baleni praised the Marikana "clean-up" in terms more befitting a securocrat than a workers' representative: "The police were patient, but these people were extremely armed with dangerous weapons," he said.

The visceral reaction of the bourgeois and upper-middle-class COSATU leaders to AMCU tends to suggest that AMCU is a union totally unlike the old organisations. Indeed AMCU executives like to present it as a maverick that recruits members across sectors, remains outside COSATU and adopts uncompromising positions in wage negotiations.

No such appraisal should be accepted. General Secretary Joseph Mathunjwa likes to portray himself as a man of the people, but that did not stop him from arriving at Marikana on the eve of the present strike in a Lexus with bodyguards attending. Mathunjwa is a former NUM member whose ejection from that union accounts, in the views of some, for his supposed vendetta against his old union. Whatever he hopes to gain by his confrontation with mining employers, a re-ordering of society in the interests of the working-class

majority is not on his agenda. He boasts of his Christianity, and has described AMCU as non-political and non-socialist. In spite of its present militant radicalism, the experience of Solidarnosc in Poland testifies as to how such formations cannot serve as the basis in the long term for independent action by the working class. Eventually, they are integrated into the political structures of the bourgeoisie.

The indelible lesson of Marikana is that it is perfectly feasible for a black government, voted for by probably the majority of the black miners on that knoll, to order a mostly black police force to cut them down in the interests of a partly black-owned mine.

Workers are unavoidably drawing the conclusion that organisations of future struggle need to be founded on the basis of class principles, not race.

Irvin Jim, Karl Cloete, Zwelinzima Vavi and company all profess their own commitment to class-based struggle. Yet the interests of this wealthy layer of union bureaucrats depend on race-based and pro-capitalist policies such as BEE that diverge fundamentally from the interests of ordinary workers. The bureaucrats mean only to use worker resistance to capitalist repression as a bargaining chip in order to secure a better place for themselves at the table with the ANC, without insisting on a new economic dispensation.

With the recent flare-up in strikes, including in the car-manufacturing industry, workers are looking for organisations that will point them in the direction of independent class struggle. Neither AMCU nor the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) deserve to be borne aloft on the wave of worker rebellion since Marikana, and nor will they be. The most advanced and militant sections of workers must instead orient themselves on new internationalist and socialist political foundations in the building of new organisations of class struggle and a new Trotskyist party of the South African working class.

Concluded



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