

Freed “illegal” miners face imprisonment and deportation in South Africa

Thabo Seseane Jr.
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Ekurhuleni Emergency Services personnel and Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department (EMPD) officers launched an effort on February 16 to coax an estimated 30 “illegal” miners out of a disused mine complex outside the town of Benoni.

Emerging sporadically, the miners were trapped after either a rock fall or a rival group barred the hole through which they entered and exited the underground complex. Located in the municipality east of Johannesburg, the abandoned mine is on property owned by Gold One International, a company belonging to a Chinese consortium.

After police declared the mine too dangerous for them to enter, on February 18 emergency services workers hoisted up the decomposing body of one miner through a different hole, some two or three kilometers away, according to Ekurhuleni mayoral spokesman Zweli Dlamini. Another corpse was recovered later in the week.

In an extraordinary move, police and mine security personnel dropped leaflets into the hole from which miners were surfacing, notifying those still underground that it would be sealed on March 3.

Among the miners, who reportedly live in the nearby township of Wattville, were undocumented Mozambican immigrants. They feared possible deportation, as well as mistreatment following the recent horrific death of Mozambican-born taxi driver Mido Macia. For a minor traffic infraction, Macia was beaten and dragged behind a police van by Daveyton, Ekurhuleni police officers in February 2013. He was then thrown into a holding cell. (See “Police murder in South Africa”)

On February 19, 10 people appeared at the Benoni Magistrates’ Court on charges including trespassing and possession of precious metals. The *New Age*

reported that the men appeared weak and tired as they entered the courtroom. Some complained that they had had no food or water since being arrested on Sunday and Monday. A delay ensued while water was fetched. When a senior prosecutor demanded to know why the men had not been fed, a policeman replied that they had not asked for food. A hearing has been postponed until February 27, while an investigation is conducted.

At abandoned mines dotting the landscape around Johannesburg, fatalities resulting from accidents are common. In June 2009, 91 illegal miners perished in a fire that broke out underground in a disused section of Harmony Gold Mining’s Eland shaft in the Free State goldfields. Last July, seven illegal miners were found dead at a mine in Brakpan, Ekurhuleni, after reported clashes with rivals underground. This year some 40 miners were arrested in Florida, west of Johannesburg, after residents claimed to have spied them arming themselves for a possible clash with rivals.

According to the G4S security group, the premises of disused mines, which are often improperly secured by mining companies, are a magnet for laid-off workers, including skilled miners. Security industry expert Brad Wood claimed on *Talk Radio 702* that established businesses were among the buyers of illicitly mined gold.

The rise of illegal mining is a corollary of the decline of the South African gold mining industry. About half of the world’s gold is South African in origin. In 1970, South Africa accounted for almost 80 percent of global gold production, but it now produces only around 6 percent.

The geology of the main gold-bearing Witwatersrand basin has forced South African mines to depths greater than anywhere else in the world. Exploration and the sinking of new shafts became more capital-intensive

while the gold price languished and input costs soared. By the late 1980s, mine owners also faced an increasingly militant and politicised workforce. This came at a time of limited access to global capital markets, thanks in part to the disinvestment of multinationals in the face of stepped-up anti-apartheid campaigns worldwide.

South African mining has not regained its former stature. This is in spite of the end of Apartheid and the unbanning of political parties based in the black majority, including the ruling African National Congress (ANC). It is also in spite of a resources boom (until roughly the 2007-2008 credit crisis), during which the Australian mine owners were the big winners as far as satisfying the demand of China for raw materials is concerned.

In the view of mining capital, the South African malaise is due to the ruling ANC's "overregulation" of the industry, to say nothing of demands for their own enrichment through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) deals. Established corporations find it onerous to have to secure finance for such deals upfront while, they complain, the ANC government mollicoddles workers through the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), their partners in the ruling Tripartite Alliance.

Given the brutal conditions facing miners already, such claims have terrible implications. All sections of capital including mining insist on extracting the cost of both BEE and the global recession from the blood and sweat of workers.

The ANC and the COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers are more than ready to oblige their paymasters. This is why among the bourgeoisie, the star of ANC Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa has been on the rise ever since his infamous role in the Marikana massacre first came to light. Capitalists see in this former union bureaucrat, the strong hand that can keep workers docile in the face of the intensified exploitation in store for legal mine workers.

As for illegal miners, Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu is talking as tough as Ramaphosa, asserting that those arrested will not simply be released but will serve jail terms. Sibanye Gold CEO Neal Froneman complained that illegal mining is well organised in the country, and that illegal miners are present even in active mines. "It is at a level that I

don't think it would be inappropriate to bring in the South African National Defence Force. It is way out of control," Froneman told analysts and journalists at the release of the group's interim results on Thursday. "It's literally war."



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