

# South African union bureaucrats seek to break strike by platinum miners

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17 March 2014

The Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) issued a statement March 11 urging the employers and police to break the platinum miners' strike led by the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) that began on January 23.

The statement read, "COSATU calls on the employers and the South African Police Service (SAPS) to devise some safe way for the workers in the platinum mines to go back to work and start earning salaries for themselves and their families." It continued, "We call on those workers to approach their employer and demand their work back as we prepare to engage the mine management on their request."

This open treachery follows an attempt by at least two ex-National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) members to organise a new union, the Workers' Association Union (WAU), on the single issue of getting miners back to work. The ongoing struggle against mining companies Lonmin, Impala Platinum and Anglo American Platinum for a R12,500 (\$1,160) entry wage was marked by the killing of 34 miners by the SAPS at Marikana in 2012.

With South Africa accounting for about 70 percent of total global output, the present strike has affected more than 40 percent of global production of platinum. It has cost producers some US\$763 million in lost revenue and employees US\$290 million in lost wages. By March 12, the three producers claimed they had foregone about 500,000oz in lost production. Amid deadlocked talks between AMCU and employers, *Business Report* declared, "Production losses... have now eclipsed those from stoppages in 2012."

WAU has been active since 2012, but was only officially launched in Rustenburg, North West province on March 1 this year. It claims a membership of 8,000, drawn from all three strike-hit mines, and from

employees of fuel suppliers and retail stores in the Rustenburg area. Brushing aside the question of seeking recognition agreements with mining companies, WAU Secretary Elphas Ngoepe said WAU existed to ensure that their members returned to work. "We cannot sit back when our members are condemned to hunger by an indefinite strike," he said.

Ngoepe, a former regional chairperson of the NUM, added that WAU was apolitical, was not competing with any union and was not affiliated to any federation. He denied that the union had been formed to defuse AMCU's strike.

WAU president Adam Selaledi said, "The current unions are not adequately addressing the needs of the workers. The current strike in the platinum mining industry will lead to massive job losses and the closure of the mines."

Selaledi previously served as NUM's deputy head of health and safety at Impala. The WAU is clearly an instrument of the NUM, COSATU and—through them—the African National Congress (ANC) government. It enables the bureaucracy as a whole to organise scabbing while maintaining "deniability." The remarks of WAU's leaders chime with those of Livhuwani Mammburuu, a spokesman for the NUM; Ngoepe and Selaledi's old union.

Commenting on the current strike, Mammburuu criticised AMCU for not being willing to budge from their R12,500 per month wage demand and argued that they should negotiate within reasonable means. Mineweb.com said he "blamed employers in the platinum industry for allowing wild cat strikes to happen in 2012, where those responsible did not face consequences for their actions."

The "consequences" faced by striking miners included mass murder at Marikana, with the active

support of the NUM. But for Mammburuu, 34 dead and scores injured was clearly not considered enough.

Strike-breaking using the union bureaucracy is a tried and tested tactic of the ruling class. The creation of the WAU has clear echoes of the setting up of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) during Britain's year-long coal miners' strike that began in March 1984. Miners in Nottinghamshire, who enjoyed better working conditions and bonuses, were targeted and cultivated by the state in order to create the UDM, a scab union that helped break the strike.

Gadafi Mdoda, a high-profile member of AMCU until his expulsion, has emerged among the would-be strike-breakers as the spokesman for a committee representing platinum mine workers around Rustenburg. He claims that workers have been bulldozed into the strike by AMCU.

"We're still saying the demand [R12,500 a month] is appropriate," Mdoda said of the current strike. "But it was not the right time to go on strike. We shouldn't have been out there while the union is in many pieces. We are not breaking the strike. [L]et's suspend the strike so we can plan properly."

The workers' committee led by Mdoda was instrumental in getting workers to abandon the NUM for AMCU in 2012. He is aligned with the pseudo-leftist Workers' and Socialist Party (WASP). (See "The roots of South Africa's Workers and Socialist Party and its political role")

Mdoda issued a wishy-washy denial of any involvement in the creation of WAU, but left open the possibility of shifting allegiances to another union in the future. "For us, it is a little too early to join a new union on our own. We need to go into whichever union with the masses behind us," he said.

For its part, WASP, through spokesman Liv Shange, has urged workers not to join WAU, but to claim worker control over AMCU. Breaking away from AMCU would be premature, Shange claims, but through independent workers' committees, workers would be able to address issues such as AMCU's lack of structures and accountability.

WASP and its leading supporter Mdoda have, in the course of a few months, gone from hailing AMCU as the alternative to the betrayals of the NUM, to railing against AMCU for being undemocratic and railroading miners into an ill-prepared strike. Now Mdoda is

leaving open the possibility of yet another shift of allegiance to some other union that has the ear of "the masses."

Mdoda's course could lead him into the WAU, or it might not. But as for WASP, it is fairly clear what is being contemplated. The group seems intent on making a new political marriage, this time with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). NUMSA has become active in the mining industry. As part of its falling out with the NUM and a faction of COSATU leaders, it has rejected the COSATU principle of "one sector, one union" and is now recruiting beyond the metalworking sector, including among miners.

In the run-up to the May 7 general election, WASP announced on March 13 that former COSATU leader Moses Mayekiso will be the party's presidential candidate. Mayekiso is a former NUMSA general secretary, and a former MP of the ruling pro-capitalist ANC. This is the kind of person WASP spokesmen have in mind when they state that "the best people to represent the voice of the working class [are] working class people themselves."

The net result of such unprincipled manoeuvring with various contending union bureaucrats is to sow confusion and political demoralisation in the working class. Workers' interests will only be represented by an organisation that is independent of COSATU, NUMSA, AMCU, WAU and the WASP-aligned workers' committee. These upper middle class, pseudo-leftist formations all work to lead workers back into impotent channels of struggle. They are fundamentally incapable of advancing an independent programme representing the working class.

Such a programme would organise for the expropriation of the mine owners, along with the overthrow of the rest of the capitalist system and its ANC/COSATU/South African Communist Party government. Only on this basis can society be reorganised for the satisfaction of human needs, not profit.



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