

South Africa's platinum strike in its 10th week

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Some 70,000 members of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have been on strike at the three largest platinum producers since January 23, demanding that basic entry level wages be more than doubled to R12,500 (US\$1,190) monthly.

Last year, the AMCU displaced the discredited National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as the biggest miners' union at Anglo American Platinum Ltd. (Amplats), Impala Platinum Holdings Ltd. and Lonmin Plc. The NUM is part of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), an ally of the ruling ANC and the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP).

Also bidding for disaffected former NUM members is the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). Mphumzi Maqungo, national treasurer, announced last week that the NUMSA is recruiting miners involved in the strike.

"There are people who are coming to the organisation and we're taking them," he said in an interview with *Moneyweb*. "We are getting in the mining industry."

Neither union, NUMSA or AMCU, offers a viable alternative to the treachery and class collaboration of the NUM.

The NUMSA is recruiting workers outside the auto manufacturing industry, its traditional base, as part of an ongoing fight with a faction of COSATU bureaucrats including NUM leaders, who oppose the faction of Zwelinzima Vavi, the COSATU general secretary whose suspension last year was recently set aside by a Gauteng province judge.

The NUMSA, which remains a COSATU affiliate, said in December it will not mobilise its members on behalf of the ANC for the May 7 general election. The

NUMSA has also stopped paying affiliation dues to the COSATU. Having remained in the governing alliance since the ANC came to power in 1994, the NUMSA is now posing as a left critic, criticising the ANC's National Development Plan for favouring the wealthy and the political elite while not doing enough for workers or creating jobs for the 25 percent of jobless South Africans.

The NUMSA's opportunistic poaching from the AMCU comes as the bourgeoisie intensifies efforts to break the strike. Following a march by AMCU members to his company's Johannesburg offices last week, Lonmin CEO Ben Magara said that the AMCU's demands "would drastically reduce jobs and decimate communities."

Magara shed crocodile tears, noting that in Rustenburg, a North West province town built on platinum mining, "People are hungry" after a tour of the platinum belt with other Lonmin executives. Lonmin executive Lerato Molebatsi told the media that the responses to text and automated voice messaging (AVM) questions sent to employee cell numbers showed that an "overwhelming majority" wanted to end the strike.

Responses to AVMS to 20,000 of 23,000 workers in work categories three to nine reportedly indicated that 67 percent wanted to return to work. Molebatsi asserted that 6,500 text responses gave the reason for staying away from work as fear of violence.

An article on the IOL website painted another picture. It quoted Siyabonga Siyo, "a married 32-year-old underground stock timbre worker" as saying, "We borrow food or money. People are helping each other."

AMCU health and safety secretary Dan Masimong noted that President Jacob Zuma had still not bothered to respond to a memorandum of grievances that the

AMCU delivered last month to the seat of government, the Union Buildings, in one of a series of protest marches. “This thing of suffering...we are used to it,” Masimong remarked. “We’d rather die than not get the R12,500.”

Commentators have repeatedly observed that striking miners would view any settlement of less than R12,500 as a betrayal of comrades who lost their lives in the August 2012 massacre at Marikana, when police shot down 34 miners and injured scores more. It was at Marikana that miners, having been physically attacked by NUM officials—and before the AMCU started recruiting them—organised themselves to first raise the R12,500 demand.

The NUM’s present role is no less despicable. It called on the signatories of the Framework Agreement, drawn up by the government, unions and mining establishment, to condemn sporadic incidents of violence that the union described as a “savage onslaught” on its scabbing members. The AMCU did not sign the Framework Agreement.

For the NUM, the drawn-out strike is nothing but a chance to whittle away at the AMCU’s dominance. “Our recruitment is moving fairly.... We have moved from three percent to 11 percent at Lonmin in Marikana,” claimed NUM Rustenburg regional secretary Sydwell Dolokwane, referring to the proportion of miners belonging to his union. Dolokwane contended that the NUM now represents 34 percent at Amplats’s Bathopele mine.

While the AMCU calls for strikes, it has no perspective on which to oppose the alliance between the union bureaucracy, the ANC and the employers that provides the essential political mechanism through which the working class is made subject to the interests of the South African bourgeoisie and the transnational mining corporations. Rather, it actively opposes such a development, declaring itself to be apolitical and non-communist—thereby utilising disaffection with the betrayals and class collaboration of the SACP to reject a socialist alternative and a struggle for state power.

The end result is that platinum miners have been out on strike for weeks, while the AMCU undertakes various marches designed to appeal for a settlement. AMCU president Joseph Mathunjwa has vowed to continue the programme of marches and is planning to target the British embassy (Lonmin is dual-listed in

London and Johannesburg stock exchanges) and parliament next.

Meanwhile, the employers are working with the government to impose a bitter defeat on the strike, including a plan to bankrupt the AMCU. Amplats instituted a court action for damages against the AMCU in the amount of R600 million. Amplats chairman and former ANC cabinet minister Valli Moosa said at the company’s annual general meeting last week that Amplats would continue to pursue the legal process. The company argues that the AMCU disregarded a Labour Court order that it make marshals available to monitor the union’s striking members, whose picketing resulted in damage to property. Amplats lawyers filed a case with the High Court in Pretoria in February.

The ruling class has also turned to traditional leaders such as chiefs and elders to mediate. A significant proportion of striking miners are of the Xhosa tribe, hailing from the rural areas of the Eastern Cape province. There, as in other former Bantustans, the ANC government has perpetuated apartheid-era structures of dominance.

The Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) was launched by feudalistic leaders of the KwaNdebele Bantustan in 1987 (the twilight of the anti-apartheid struggle) to articulate the interests of traditional leaders and nominally act as an extra-parliamentary opposition to the white supremacist regime. According to *South African History Online*, “By the time...Contralesa was launched nationally in 1989, traditional leaders...had become one of the ANC’s most important rural partners.” Mathunjwa has warned correctly that “Their involvement will only result in ethnic violence in the platinum belt.”



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