

Workers reject employers' offer in South African platinum mining strike

Thabo Seseane Jr.
7 May 2014

Amid a 15-week strike, South African workers belonging to the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have rejected the latest wage offer from Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), Impala Platinum (Implats) and Lonmin.

AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa, after addressing a rally of about 5,000 workers at Lonmin's Marikana mine on April 29, said the union now planned to inform bosses of the rejection in face-to-face meetings.

The mine owners gambled that after three months with no pay, workers are ready to accept anything. To the bourgeoisie's dismay, they are still holding out for a more than doubling of basic entry-level pay to R12,500 (US\$1,190) a month over three to four years.

For the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the longest labour dispute since the end of apartheid in 1994 is a major blow and is set to overshadow the May 7 general election that it touts as a "celebration" of 20 years of majority rule.

Amid wider unrest in the North West province, the scene of the strike, Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa declared, "These are criminal and anarchistic acts that cannot be tolerated in a democracy. I have instructed the [South African Police Service] to act swiftly and decisively against the criminals".

Mthethwa was referring to the torching of eight houses belonging to police officers in Bloemhof. In Rooigrond near Mahikeng, 12 people were arrested after the burning of a municipal councillor's house. Another person was arrested following the burning of the ANC office in Rustenburg's Freedom Park squatter camp, where a councillor's house was also burnt.

Minister of Sports and Recreation Fikile Mbalula had to call off his door-to-door campaigning in Freedom Park on April 28. He was evacuated in a bulletproof vehicle as residents stoned his motorcade.

The same day, President Jacob Zuma was forced to cancel what would have been a provocative campaign stop at Wonderkop in Marikana, when violence broke out in anticipation of his visit. At Marikana, police under orders from the ANC gunned down 34 miners during a non-unionised strike in August 2012, when workers first raised the R12,500 per month pay demand.

The ANC government, the police, the mining companies and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)—the traditional mining union that was displaced by AMCU after its betrayal of workers at Marikana—have collaborated with the media and various other elements in persistent attempts to break the strike.

Of the organisations claiming to oppose the NUM and the ANC, none offer workers any progressive alternative. The pseudo-leftist parties like the misnamed Workers and Socialist Party (WASP) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) exist only to capture workers' votes and, by tying workers to AMCU, keep them from founding an independent working class movement that can make a bid for power.

In remarks made just before January 23, the strike's first day, WASP leader Mametlwe Sebei said the party was concerned that AMCU would fail to achieve its aims as it did not have a "battle plan". But their own battle plan did not extend beyond united action with the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) in "their planned ... mass actions".

In reality, Numsa as COSATU's largest affiliate underpinned the campaign to subordinate workers' struggles to the requirements of the ruling ANC elite for years. Numsa is currently posturing as the defender of traditional labour interests in a COSATU gone astray. This is nothing but a tactic in an ongoing faction

fight between different groups among the wealthy bourgeois and middle class layers at the top of the trade union structures.

Whether the winner is the group aligned to COSATU President Sdumo Dlamini, or the one that favoured the reinstatement of previously-suspended COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, makes no material difference to workers' struggles. They will continue to be suppressed and superseded by the promotion of holy cows like national unity, competitiveness and the interests of global investors. But WASP will not say this to workers.

Elsewhere, the WASP statement complains of the expulsion of eight of its supporters from AMCU: who led the strike committees "that coordinated the strikes in the wake of the Marikana massacre ... AMCU in fact owes its entire position ... to these comrades amongst others. They took workers into AMCU expecting and demanding an entirely different regime to the one they abandoned in the ... NUM [thanks to] which the majority of the mineworkers in the platinum belt ... face[d] sustained betrayals, not least of all [at] Marikana itself. Such is Mathunjwa's ingratitude ..."

As strike committee leaders, those expelled by AMCU had a responsibility to warn workers from the start against illusions in the likes of Mathunjwa, an ex-NUM member steeped in its top-down, anti-democratic culture. WASP promotes the illusion that as leopards can be pressured into changing their spots, union leaders can similarly subordinate their inimical class interests to those of workers.

The position of WASP co-founder, the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM) is no different. A post-Marikana DSM pamphlet reads in part: "AMCU's replacement of NUM as the majority union across so much of the mining sector is potentially an improvement on the previous situation where NUM enjoyed unchallenged domination and betrayed the workers by actively colluding with the bosses. But ultimately, the DSM's loyalty is to the interests of the mineworkers and the working class as a whole".

If this were true, the DSM would have warned workers away from AMCU instead of driving them to it. By the time DSM fellow travellers had woken up enough to offer some resistance to the subordination of workers' strike committees to the authority of AMCU organisers, it was too late.

Under conditions of the breakdown of the global capitalist system, the bourgeoisie must enlist the help of left talking organisations like WASP and the DSM to better emasculate workers' resistance to the implementation of redoubled assaults against living standards and working conditions.

The Bench Marks Foundation reports that, in the 20 years up to 2008, the three biggest platinum mining firms enjoyed an annual operating profit margin of 30 percent. By comparison, the long-term cost on equity in South Africa averages 14 percent annually. According to economist Dick Forslund, "Labour productivity... has increased from the start of democracy at ... more than 3 percent on average, year on year. From 1998 until [2012], on average, annual real wage increases have been one percentage point lower than the increase in labour productivity".

At the opposite pole of society, South African chief executives earn more than their counterparts in Germany, the UK and France. In fact, only the obscenely overcompensated American CEOs earn more. Across industries, the authors of *Executive Salaries*, Kaylan Massie and Debbie Collier, report that CEOs of the country's top 50 companies are today earning on average, annual packages of R49 million (US\$4.66 million), three times what they earned in 2005. A column on the book on the IOL website notes: "The only positive change ... is that a quarter of the chief executives are now black".

That is cold comfort for striking platinum miners. The black CEOs are the only beneficiaries of the ANC's "Black Economic Empowerment" policies and this is at the direct expense of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact