

South African miners speak: “We are striking so our children don’t also end up with nothing”

Our reporters
29 May 2014

The *World Socialist Web Site* conducted an interview with Robert, one of the 70,000 Association of Construction and Mineworkers Union (AMCU) members who have struck at Anglo American Platinum, Impala Platinum and Lonmin mines in North West province since January 23 for an increase in the minimum wage to R12,500 (\$1,200 US / €884) per month. We also spoke to Michael, who is not directly involved in the present strike, but has a long history in the industry. Real names have not been used.

WSWS: Robert, How long have you worked for Lonmin?

Robert: A decade. I’m married with one child. Because of the strike, right now I am back near the Botswana border where my people are from. At work, I pay R1,500 a month rent on an RDP house [named for the Redistribution and Development Programme] from pay of about R4,500. Some of my friends pay R850 a month for a three square metre shack made of prefabricated concrete. The money is too little. With the rest, I must see to insurance policies, my needs and my brother’s and my mother’s, who are both not working. If one of them died, I don’t know how I would meet the funeral expenses.

WSWS: What have you heard from the platinum belt?

Robert: I chat to my friends on WhatsApp every day. It’s mostly quiet. They say there are some strike-breakers. We call them *amagundane* [isiZulu for rats]. But nobody is really worried about them. These are mostly women, [lower-level] category 4-9 workers. They are left alone because they sneak into the mines with the union officials. Some of the women work underground. But right now there’s no work. So they clock in and get paid for sitting around. How can the company pay people for just sitting around? Clearly there’s enough money for our demands.

WSWS: How do you feel about the strike?

Robert: A mandate is a mandate. We gave AMCU the mandate to negotiate for R12,500 a long time ago. We have decided to see it through, even if the strike goes on for a year or two. My brother was a miner, and so was my father. They had nothing to show for it when they retired. There’s a good chance my child will also become a miner. He will have nothing to show at the end of his life. This is why we’re striking, so that our children don’t also end up with nothing.

WSWS: How do you feel about the African National Congress’s 62.2 percent election win?

Robert: That’s to the advantage of the Black Economic Empowerment guys who have shares in the mines. Also to the advantage of the National Union of Mineworkers and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions. The ANC has shareholders in Lonmin, like [Cyril] Ramaphosa. They side with the whites. The ANC covers for them. The ANC, NUM and COSATU are all one thing, and NUM sold us out. Every time we questioned them over an issue, like not distributing bursaries for workers to improve their skills, they would tell us, ‘Comrades, the issue is being addressed. Don’t rock the boat.’

WSWS: Are you aware of the Labour Court case involving AMCU’s application to stop the employers sending workers text messages?

Robert: I’m aware of the text messages. There were lots of them. They were mostly about getting people to report to get their medication for HIV, medication for TB or high blood pressure. There were also texts with the company wage offer, where you had to vote for or against, and give your name and company number. I never believed the company offer was true. If it met the mandate, AMCU would have said so. I deleted those texts without responding.

WSWS: Michael, tell us about your experiences in mining.

Michael: I have worked in the mining industry as an engineer for 20 years. I am not working at the moment, but I fully support the miners' strike and their demand for R12,500 per month. Their salary is nowhere near enough to cover basic necessities. Billions of rand are being sucked out of the industry. The directors are paid fantastic salaries, as well as massive bonuses and stock options. But they claim they can't afford to pay the miners a living wage.

The present situation is horrible. The areas where the miners and their families live have not been properly developed. They live in shacks of corrugated iron usually of one or two rooms, with no running water, no flush toilets and no electricity. When it rains the roadways are a sea of mud. Food is very expensive and they have to travel between 20 and 40 kilometres into town to buy what they need.

WSWS: What about the trade unions in South Africa?

Michael: The strike began in January and the strikers and their families are really suffering. But they are being sustained by the community, with money from their families.

The National Union of Mineworkers is a treacherous organisation. Most of its leaders are in business and spend all their time protecting their interests. Some of them have set up companies that supply the mining industry. Cyril Ramaphosa was the general secretary of the NUM. Now he is a non-executive member of the board of directors of the mining company Lonmin and he is a rand billionaire.

All the trade union leaders have political ambitions that have nothing to do with the interests of the working class. They are members of the African National Congress and aim to rise through its ranks to positions of power.

WSWS: What do you think about the Marikana massacre?

Michael: That was a terrible crime against the miners. I have a suspicion that it was planned beforehand. I can recall seeing the Commissioner of Police on television saying that by four o'clock that day they were going to resolve the situation. She refused to say how, but she meant that the strikers had to be removed from the koppie (hilltop) using any means.

Since then I have heard that Ramaphosa himself sent an email to the Minister of Police. As a high ranking member of the ANC, he was telling the police that they had to resolve the issue. And they did this through the use of brutal and bloody force, leaving 34 miners dead and 78

seriously injured.

WSWS: What do you think about the recent general election result?

Michael: The ANC won, but with a reduced vote. Some people are still loyal to the ANC but the vast majority are not satisfied with what they are doing in South Africa. For the past 20 years there has not been any real change. The only change has been in the right to vote, but the life of the working class has not changed. If anything it has got worse.

The level of unemployment is now 25 percent and for the youth it is between 50 and 60 percent. It is terrible. Before 1994 there were more small businesses in the towns that provided jobs, mainly clothing and other small scale manufacture. But that more or less finished and the jobs have disappeared. People are trapped in the villages and pensioners and a few others who get money from the state are having to feed their grandchildren.

Before 1994, the ANC were advocating nationalisation of all the basic sectors of the economy—the banks, mining, etc. But after the end of Apartheid the business people had meetings with the ANC and advised them to give up nationalisation and put forward a programme of Black Economic Empowerment. Only a few have benefited, mainly the leadership of the ANC itself. They now have huge business interests in the economy, so they prefer policies friendly to business and not to the working class.

WSWS: How do you see the future?

Michael: South Africa could be a great country. We have the best infrastructure on the continent with plenty of natural resources. But when you compare our GDP with that of other countries, we are the lowest.

In 1994 there were high expectations of the ANC, but they are not ruling for the benefit of the people but for themselves. At the present time there isn't a viable alternative. I can foresee a South African version of the Arab Spring, similar what happened in Tunisia. The unemployed youth are frustrated and desperate. But they don't accept the situation. For the miners it is the same. They are desperate and struggling even though they have got jobs. Something has got to change.



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