Miners Shot Down: Documentary about the 2012 Marikana massacre

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Directed by Rehad Desai

Miners Shot Down is a powerful but politically flawed documentary about the Marikana massacre in August 2012 in which 34 platinum miners were shot dead and 78 wounded by South African police.

The work received the audience award for the best documentary at the 13th "Out of Europe—New films from Africa" festival in Cologne, Germany. The festival, first held in 1992, has been a biannual event since 1996. The most recent edition, September 18-28, screened 83 films from 27 African countries.

Miners Shot Down carefully reconstructs the series of events by which a protest by thousands of miners demanding a living wage at the Lonmin platinum mine ended in a bloodbath after seven days.

Along with the testimony of miners who participated in the strike and interviews with politicians and lawyers representing victims' families, the film uses a variety of source material, including police videos and videos made by Lonmin security guards, as well as footage taken by Al Jazeera and shared with the film crew.

Directed by Rehad Desai (son of the late Barney Desai, anti-apartheid activist and leader of the Pan Africanist Congress) and first screened in March 2014 in Prague, *Miners Shot Down* convincingly refutes the official version of the South African Police Service and the ANC government. According to that version of events, the protests and violence at the Lonmin mine near Rustenberg were solely the result of a conflict between two rival unions and the police acted in self-defense.

Desai's film begins with the image of a contingent of striking miners walking toward a line of police vehicles backed by a militarized police force. Within seconds, the first shots ring out and the group of miners begins to disperse. As they attempt to escape, automatic fire rips through the group. As the dust clears, dozens of miners are left bleeding and fighting for their lives. After this shocking opening, *Miners Shot Down* shifts to the comments made by President Jacob Zuma and the national police commissioner, Mangwashi Victoria Phiyega, following the bloodbath. Both asserted it was a time to mourn, not a time to blame.

In contrast, the documentary's goal is to establish just that: "Who is responsible for the massacre?" It clearly points to the South African Police Service, which carried out this atrocity with the full support of the Zuma government. Desai's film lays bare the cooperation between the ruling elite, police and politicians. It explores the betrayal carried out by various union leaders and, perhaps inadvertently, exposes the essence of the social role of the unions--the defense of the status quo.

Platinum miners face brutal working conditions in South Africa, earning poverty wages in spite of the huge profits made from extracting the world's most valuable metal. Miners began publicly airing their long-standing grievances at the Lonmin operation on August 10, 2012 and demanded an increase in monthly wages to 12,500 South African Rand [US$1,200].

However, the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the union claiming to represent most of the miners at that point, refused to negotiate a wage increase. Increasingly disgusted with the way NUM officials were handling the situation, workers began acting independently and took matters into their own hands.

After they were turned back by a Lonmin official, unarmed workers marched to the NUM's offices to present the bureaucrats with a memorandum on August 11. Rather than meet with the workers, NUM officials and thugs at the office came out with guns blazing, killing two protesting workers.

Following days of unrest, striking miners occupied a small hill on public land and refused to descend until mine management discussed wages with them. On August 13 a contingent of the miners went back to the Lonmin offices to try and negotiate a wage increase once more. This march resulted in the first confrontation with police.

When the miners rejected the demand to put down their weapons--spears and machetes--police began shooting tear gas at the group. When the workers started running, police opened fire, killing at least three miners. Two police officers were also killed during the incident. The death of the police officers was seized upon by the media, politicians and police to paint the miners as criminals and justify the increased police presence and militarization near the plant.

Tellingly, *Miners Shot Down* shifts at this point to focus on the role of Cyril Ramaphosa, the former NUM chief and now one of South Africa's richest individuals. Archive material of Ramaphosa at a union event during the apartheid era highlights his "left" demagogy, now revealed as entirely hollow. We see him intoning, "There is no such thing as a liberal bourgeois. They are all the same. They use fascist methods to destroy workers' lives."

In the intervening years Ramaphosa has accumulated an estimated wealth of $700 million and a seat on Lonmin's board of directors. According to the *Cape Times*, "His Shanduka group

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owns 9 percent of the company [Lonmin] through its 50 percent stake in Incwala Resources, Lonmin's black economic empowerment partner." These days the former union leader does not hesitate to use "fascist"-like methods to suppress workers' struggles.

Desai cites emails sent by Ramaphosa 24 hours before the police fired live ammunition at the unarmed workers. In the emails, Ramaphosa denounced the miners as "dastardly criminals" and stated that there "needs to be concomitant actions to address this situation."

No alternative

The weakest aspect of *Miners Shot Down* is its effort to present Joseph Mathunjwa, the head of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), formed as a breakaway faction from the NUM in 1998, as a genuine alternative to the NUM and to class traitors such as Ramaphosa.

In Desai's documentary, during a radio interview together with the general secretary of the NUM and Lonmin management in the days leading up to the Marikana massacre, Mathunjwa suggests they all go to the occupied hill to negotiate with the workers. A bizarre series of events then ensues. Although management initially agreed to meet then failed to follow through on the agreement, the AMCU and NUM leaders went together to the hill.

Rather than simply walk over to the workers, the union officials were forced to approach three strikers' representatives from inside a police armored vehicle. One of the leading figures among the miners, Mgcineni "Mambush" Noki, had to approach the armored vehicle, climb onto its bumper and speak through the barred windshield because the police drivers refused to shut off the motor, which was creating too much noise to communicate the demands of the workers.

After these failed attempts at negotiation, Mathunjwa spoke directly to the miners on the hill promising that management would come the next morning to discuss the miners' demands if they stayed calm. This gave police enough time to bring in more troops for an attempt at forcibly removing the workers from the hill. The next morning, more than 1,500 policemen with assault rifles, shotguns, barbed wire and armored vehicles surrounded the 3,000 workers who were armed only with sticks and machetes. One of the failings of the film is its glossing over of Mathunjwa's fatal delaying tactics.

As miners came to realize that management was never going to negotiate, they began to leave the mountain and head towards the plant. In a gruesome scene, the chanting miners slowly move toward the police line but are mowed down by a barrage of gunfire. One of the first to be shot, hit by 14 bullets, was Mgcineni Noki. Desai suggests he was singled out. The day before the shooting, police worked with company officials to identify strike leaders, who were subsequently targeted.

After the initial murderous assault, police hunted down escaping miners, killing another 17, and evidence clearly points to execution-style murders.

After the Cologne screening of the film, which was well received by the audience, a question-and-answer session was held, involving the producer of *Miners Shot Down* (and the director's sister), Zivia Desai Keiper, and Bheki Buthelezi, one of the leading figures of the Marikana Support Campaign, a movement supported by the AMCU, Amnesty International and various NGOs.

Several questions dealt with the role of the Marikana Commission of Inquiry chaired by Judge Ian Gordon Farlam, a retired judge of the Supreme Court of Appeal. Keiper explained that the commission was established to whitewash the responsible figures. So far no one from the government, the police or Lonmin has been charged or arrested. By contrast, 270 miners participating in the wildcat strike were arrested and charged with murder.

Other questions focused on the failed national-racial politics of the ANC. Both Keiper and Buthelezi noted that workers were coming to realize that the ANC had only created a new small layer of powerful black politicians and businessmen that continues the same type of oppression seen during the Apartheid era.

Both visitors indicated at the Cologne screening they were supporters of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), founded by former ANC Youth Organization leader Julius Malema. However, like the AMCU, this party offers no genuine alternative to the betrayal of the NUM or its former leader Ramaphosa. It has been formed to channel the widespread discontent with the ANC into politically harmless channels.

The claim that Mathunjwa and the AMCU represent something quite different from the NUM is clearly false. Time and again Mathunjwa portrays himself as a man of the people, but a social revolution in the interests of the working class majority is not on his agenda. He boasts of his Christianity and has described the AMCU as non-political and non-socialist. The same is true of Malema's EFF. In spite of its present militant rhetoric, such formations cannot serve as the basis for independent action by the working class.

Despite its serious political shortcomings, however, *Miners Shot Down* unambiguously documents the atrocity conducted by the ANC regime against nearly unarmed mine workers. Although the film has been well received globally, broadcasting companies in South Africa have so far refused to show the film due to their strong connections to the ANC and Ramaphosa. Upcoming screening events are listed here.

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