

# The phony internationalism of the United Steelworkers

## A warning to US oil workers on South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers

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At the end of February the United Steelworkers union sponsored a weeklong tour of international union officials, including delegates of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) of South Africa. Billed as a series of “solidarity events,” the trip included a stop at the Sherwin Alumina plant in Gregory, Texas, where 450 USW members are locked out, and visits to picket lines at the LyondellBasell and Marathon refineries in the Houston area where a combined 1,900 workers are taking part in the five-week long oil workers’ strike.

In addition to the NUM officials, the group also included union leaders from UNITE, the public sector union in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) of Australia.

Long identified with the most noxious flag-waving nationalism, the USW has not suddenly changed its stripes. The event was a publicity stunt, which while attempting to mollify the strivings of workers to unify their struggles internationally was designed to conceal the isolation and betrayal of the oil workers’ strike by the USW. In the face of the intransigence of the oil giants and threats to replace strikers, the USW continues to defy the will of workers and limit the walkout to only a fraction of its members in the oil industry.

As nationalist and pro-capitalist organisations, the labour unions in the US and around the world are the chief obstacle to the global unity of the working class. The USW’s guests were in Texas not to build up the international solidarity of ordinary workers, but to compare notes on how best to strangle worker militancy for the benefit of the capitalist bosses.

Like the USW, UNITE and CFMEU have collaborated in the destruction of energy workers’ jobs, living

standards and safety conditions. The South African union leaders have gone particularly far in their incorporation into the ruling establishment, through their membership in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a formal partner of the country’s ruling African National Congress (ANC).

They have also committed the worst crimes against the working class.

South African capital had to turn to union bureaucrats to quell the pre-revolutionary uprising against apartheid, which intensified throughout the country in the mid-1980s. Union leaders were happy to oblige, having through their privileges and higher pay become alienated from the daily struggles of the rank and file over years.

Those who signed up in the service of capital include COSATU founder General Secretary Jay Naidoo, former premier of Gauteng province Mbhazima Shilowa and current South African Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, who served as first general secretary of the NUM until he was elected ANC general secretary in 1991.

Ramaphosa and his like proved an invaluable guarantor of capitalist rule throughout the multiparty negotiations leading to the end of apartheid. He, above all, used his influence to get the masses to identify politically with the ANC, an anti-working class bourgeois nationalist party.

For his services Ramaphosa was richly rewarded. He and a few others amassed obscene wealth through the ANC’s Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies, through which established capital co-opted a thin layer of politically useful black representatives at the expense of the poor majority. The ANC elite and monopoly capital understood that private property had no hope of survival in post-apartheid South Africa, unless the masses could be convinced that they too could one day see an

improvement in their own lives. Of course only a select few did, becoming millionaires and billionaires in the process.

The years following the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994 saw a worsening of inequality in all spheres of life as the new ruling elite sought to attract foreign investment by offering up South African workers as cheap labor on the global market.

While there are a few more bourgeois and upper middle class blacks over 60 percent of the population earn less than \$7,000 a year. Blacks make up over 90 percent of the country's poor. The top ten percent of the population earn almost two thirds of total income, in a country with a poverty line of just \$43 a month.

## Marikana Massacre

Social anger among working people reached the breaking point by the time of the wildcat strike at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, North West province in August 2012.

The strike developed into a political rebellion against the NUM, which was widely regarded as a company union for suppressing wage demands. Rock drill operators marched to the local NUM headquarters demanding their support. Five leading NUM figures and other shop stewards came out of the office and began shooting at the protesting strikers, killing two.

NUM General Secretary Frans Baleni on August 13 called "for the deployment of a special task force or the SANDF [South African National Defence Force] to deal decisively with the criminal elements in Rustenburg and its surrounding mines."

As a shareholder and non-executive director of the company, Ramaphosa pocketed around \$18 million a year and coined his services to the capitalist class in miners' blood.

He put pressure on Nathi Mthethwa, then minister of police, to act against the striking workers, calling their strike in demand of a living wage "dastardly criminal" and demanding "concomitant action" against them.

Miners were corralled with the aid of barbed wire, squeezing them on all sides except one. Police opened fire. Dozens were mowed down in cold blood. Some survivors were run over by armoured police vehicles. Others were methodically hunted down and shot

execution style, often in the back.

The massacre of striking workers claimed 36 lives and injured 72. Marikana miners later denounced the NUM, displaying a banner reading, "Death Certificate; first name: NUM; cause of death: corruption."

The strike provoked a wildcat involving 100,000 workers hitting South Africa's platinum, gold, diamond and coal industries that were betrayed by the NUM and other COSATU unions at a cost of tens of thousands of workers being sacked.

Just months afterwards the massacre, the ANC congress elected Ramaphosa as deputy president.

So why did the USW bring the butchers of Marikana to Houston? The fact is the USW would act no less violently towards a rebellion by rank-and-file oil workers in the United States in order to defend its lucrative relationship with the corporations and the Obama administration. Rather than mobilizing workers to defend the embattled oil workers, USW President Leo Gerard and the hundreds of upper middle class businessmen who run the USW far more prefer a smashing defeat of the strike.

The global economic crisis and the fall in crude oil prices has been used by the international energy conglomerates to escalate the attack on oil workers. Strikes by oil workers have broken out in the US and Colombia and 20,000 North Sea oil rig workers are currently voting for strike action later this month.

Workers throughout the world are fighting the same mining and oil corporations. To forge the international unity of the working class, they must wage a struggle against the capitalists' bought and paid for unions. Rather than the international unity of nationalist and pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies, workers must fight for the unity of the international working class on the basis of a new, socialist perspective.

This struggle must be expanded and developed into a confrontation not just with the multinationals, but the entire corporate and financial aristocracy and the capitalist governments that defend them, including the Democrats and Republicans in the United States, and the ANC in South Africa.

Only the *World Socialist Web Site* fights for this perspective.



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