Miners force ANC President Ramaphosa to abandon May Day speech

COSATU cites Trotsky's warning of a day of reckoning

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In extraordinary scenes, striking gold miners booed and barracked South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa, overwhelmed the police and stormed the stage, forcing him to abandon his speech at a Workers' Day rally on Sunday and flee the stadium in his limousine.

Having completely underestimated the miners' hatred of Ramaphosa and the African National Congress (ANC) government, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) had invited the president to address their flagship rally in the northwestern city of Rustenburg, the centre of the country's mining region. Their other guest speaker, general secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP) Blade Nzimande, was likewise unable to take the floor.

Workers at Sibanye-Stillwater's mines have been on strike since February in support of their demand for a wage increase of 1,000 rands ($63) per month in a labour contract set to last three years, having rejected the company's offer of 850 rands ($54).

Ramaphosa started his address with a call for the striking workers and other members of COSATU to calm down and listen to what he had to say, telling them, "We have heard that you want your 1,000 rands. We will deal with that matter." The miners would have none of it and forced him to quit.

They were furious when they found out that Neal Froneman, the company's CEO, had an eye-watering R300 million-plus pay package in 2021, including a R12.42 million salary, R7.8 million bonus and R246 million share scheme. It comes courtesy of a year with record-high prices for gold, platinum and other base metals, even as the company refused a paltry increase for the workers who generated its profits.

The company's super-exploitative practices have led to such terrible fatality rates (20 of the country's 45 mining deaths in 2018 took place in Sibanye-Stillwater's mines) that rival unions the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Solidarity and UASA The Union all called for its closure until safety compliances were met. This demand was rejected by Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe, who derided the unions as "populists" and praised Sibanye-Stillwater for making a great contribution to South Africa's economy.

Ramaphosa is a particularly hated figure in Rustenburg, where his demand for a police clampdown precipitated the Marikana massacre of 34 striking miners, shot dead in 2012 at a mine owned by the Lonmin group. Having headed South Africa's largest trade union, the National Union of Mineworkers, during the struggle against Apartheid, Ramaphosa had in the following years become a multimillionaire through exploiting the structures of Black Economic Empowerment established by the ANC's leadership to feather their own nests at the direct expense of the workers. He was a non-executive director of Lonmin in his role as its "BEE partner".

It was in the aftermath of this murderous action, carried out with the full backing of the COSATU-affiliated NUM, that "the butcher of Marikana" was elected as the ANC's general secretary. In June 2019, Sibanye-Stillwater took over Lonmin, making it the world's largest primary producer of platinum and rhodium.

No less significant than Ramaphosa being booted off the May Day Rally was COSATU's desperate warning

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to the ANC, with which it has for decades formed a triple alliance along with the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP). Together, they suppressed workers' struggles and prevented them taking a revolutionary approach to ending Apartheid, thereby ensuring the survival of South African capitalism.

Official COSATU spokesperson Sizwe Pamla said in a statement issued Monday that while Ramaphosa being howled off the stage by workers on May Day was "regrettable" and "unacceptable," it was an understandable expression of workers' frustration with the ANC government. The ANC, he wrote, was "threatening the coherence and the legitimacy of the Alliance [with the SACP and COSATU] in the eyes of the working class."

This was followed by the extraordinary statement, "Historically Worker's Day is a day where workers reflect on their struggles and push for change. This is a message that the ANC cannot claim to misunderstand and that cannot be ignored anymore. The Marxist revolutionary and political theorist Leon Trotsky once said: 'The party that leans upon the workers but serves the bourgeoisie, in the period of the greatest sharpening of the class struggle, cannot but sense the smells wafted from the waiting grave'."

To cite such a passage from Trotsky in a milieu schooled for decades in the counter-revolutionary politics of Stalinism by the SACP is the equivalent to a slap in the face for the ANC leadership.

But it was done on behalf of the bureaucrats responsible for policing the working class as a warning to their ANC partners, who move in the more rarified circles of corporate boardrooms and government officialdom, that they have massively underestimated the anger building among miners and the entire working class.

The COSATU statement continues, "The fact that we are the most unequal country in the world is a sign that South Africa is slowly sinking in the abyss. A 46 percent real unemployment rate, stagnant wages, and budget cuts have all exhausted the patience of South African workers." Pamla added that workers have reason to be livid when 2.2 million people have lost their jobs in the last two years, a reference to the government's inadequate response to the pandemic that has led to more than 100,000 people losing their lives and millions being driven into poverty.

Pamla was forced to admit that COSATU had in 2017 backed Ramaphosa as the successor to Jacob Zuma, who was forced to resign amid mounting allegations of corruption. And whatever belated measures are taken by the union bureaucracy to distance themselves from the ANC, no one is likely to forget this record. As Pamla himself stated, "We are in no position to predict what will happen at future labour gatherings…"

Leading analyst and former head of the South African Institute of Race Relations, Professor Sipho Seepe, told *Cape News*, "Cosatu failed to see this coming, which suggests its disconnect with its own constituency. At the same time, workers are saying they are gatvol [totally fed up] with Ramaphosa, his administration and the ANC. They see him as a stooge of white capital and anti-worker… In him they see a person who has sold his soul."

A day of political reckoning is approaching for the ANC, COSATU, the SACP and the South African bourgeoisie. But the way forward proceeds through the working class basing its struggles on the revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective fought for against Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and imperialism by Trotsky and represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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