The Stilfontein massacre: A crime of the ANC and South African capitalism

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Seventy-eight dead bodies have been brought to the surface of the abandoned gold mine at Stilfontein in South Africa, after being blockaded by the African National Congress government for months. Another 248 gaunt and emaciated miners made it out alive in the last few days, during a desultory rescue operation the government had to be ordered to carry out by the High Court in Pretoria.

"We do not want a situation where this will be marked as the darkest point in our history," Judge Ronel Tolmay said, giving the order a few days ago, alluding to the outrage in the population.

But the ANC is already guilty of a horrific crime. The Stilfontein mine was being worked by thousands of desperately impoverished people when security forces moved in last summer, as part of the ANC's *Vala Umgodi* (Plug the Hole) operation aimed at driving an estimated 30,000 "illegal" miners out of abandoned pits across the country.

Police blocked food and water in an effort to "smoke them out", arresting roughly 1,500 people as they emerged in the last five months. They have been charged with crimes including illegal mining, trespass and illegal migration. Many were too weak to climb out and died before the rescue operation, during which no government worker would enter the mine, could reach them.

These workers were murdered by the ANC government. Its barbarous actions are a devastating indictment of bourgeois nationalism and all the forces which have backed the ANC historically, including the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

Mining in abandoned pits takes place in South Africa thanks to the social havoc wrought by the shuttering of much of the country's mining infrastructure and the broader poverty in the country fueling a huge informal sector and a workforce preyed upon by criminal syndicates.

Under apartheid, South Africa's lucrative mining industry was built on the rampant exploitation of black workers—who suffered extreme racial discrimination and restrictions on organising—organised through the Chamber of Mines to prevent any bidding up of wages in competition between mine owners for employees. This was aided by the recruitment of huge numbers of migrant workers from neighbouring countries.

A combination of sharply falling gold prices, underinvestment and outdated machinery, and the depletion of the most easily accessible reserves began to put enormous pressure on the industry in the late 1980s. Also confronting a surge in unionised activity bound up with the popular revolt which put an end to apartheid, the mine owners responded with closures and mass lay-offs. The sector shed roughly 300,000 jobs between 1990 and 2020, leaving many communities without any source of income.

The new ANC government and its Tripartite Alliance with the SACP and COSATU oversaw this war on the working class, while elevating a few more privileged members of the black South African population into the ranks of the super-rich—including the ranks of mine owners. Patrice Motsepe is emblematic of this process, becoming South Africa's first black billionaire in 2008 (he is now worth $2.8 billion) through his ownership of African Rainbow Minerals and Harmony Gold Mining.

Other multi-hundred millionaire beneficiaries include Tokyo Sexwale, with sizeable diamond mining interests, and coal mine owner Sipho Nkosi, who served a term as president of the Chamber of Mines. Mining wealth has also contributed to the sprawling fortune of President Ramaphosa.

Meanwhile, the black working class—who still make up 80-85 percent of miners—continue to work in the brutal conditions brought to international attention by the Marikana Massacre in 2012. Tens of thousands are forced to eke out a living in the extraordinarily dangerous abandoned mines, largely at the mercy of criminal syndicates, estimated to be extracting billions of dollars a year.

These *zama zama* ("take a chance", or "hustler") miners are part of South Africa's huge informal economy, accounting for a quarter to a third of its workforce. Such

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workers lack even the most basic protections, serving as a source of hyper-exploitable labour. Their conditions create opportunities for criminal networks to flourish, frequently with the aid of political connections to various levels of the state.

Considered entirely disposable by South Africa's capitalist class and its political representatives, they are treated with undisguised brutality and contempt. Minister for Mineral Resources Gwede Mantashe asked provocatively this week of the miners at Stilfontein: "If you go and take a risk voluntarily, how is human rights [part of the question]?

"You go, a train is coming, and you sleep on the rail line, and the train runs over you. Can we address that as a human rights issue? Can we address that as a humanitarian issue? Illegal mining is not different from that."

Seeking to stir up xenophobia, he added with reference to the migrant workers in the mine, "It's a criminal activity. It's an attack on our economy by foreign nationals in the main." Officials say most of the arrested Stilfontein miners are from Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Lesotho.

The ANC government has made a point of cracking down on migration this parliament, setting up a South African Border Management Authority last April which has already arrested and deported 410,000 people. Like *Vala Umgodi*, it is aimed at the criminalisation and abuse of southern Africa's most vulnerable workers, who regularly have to cross borders in search of a job.

Mantashe concluded, "While there's a criminal activity, there's a crime scene... It [the government] should be intensifying the fight against illegal mining."

The national spokesperson for the South African police was similarly clear: "Our mandate was to combat criminality and that is exactly what we've been doing. By providing food, water and necessities to these illegal miners it would be the police entertaining and allowing criminality to thrive."

The ANC's government partners, the Democratic Alliance, made a lame attempt to distance themselves from the deaths, asking "why the situation was allowed to get so badly out of hand," while still complaining that the police do not have the "firepower […] to get to grips with illegal mining."

COSATU North West Secretary Kopano Konopi said the state was to blame, but only for delaying its "rescue operation". He told eNCA:

> The state made a commitment that they would take over, now it is more than a month and it's now that we see the state acting and taking over the process of rescuing the people underground… If this action could have been executed in the past year when we requested… we would have saved many lives.

He added, "There are more questions than answers and we are a bit disappointed."

Speaking in November, North West SACP Secretary Madoda Sambatha called for community groups to persuade the miners to leave, but made clear to Newzroom Africa, "We support the programme of the government of operation *Vala Umgodi*."

He added:

> I would not say they are trapped… The only problem that is bringing us here is that their work is illegal, their work is not permitted by any law; that's why they must be found and brought outside… police are working on implementation of a government policy.

The Stilfontein massacre is graphic proof of Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution: that none of the basic social and democratic questions confronting the working class in countries whose capitalist development was delayed by imperialist oppression and exploitation can be solved under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie.

The ANC has been in power for 30 years and cannot so much as provide all its citizens with a regular job—criminalising and even killing workers for doing what they can to earn a living. Its destroyed political reputation is reflected in plummeting vote shares at the last two elections—losing its majority in 2023.

The popular dissatisfaction growing in South Africa is common to all the Southern African countries, among workers and rural poor who confront the same basic situation. In Botswana last month, the Botswana Democratic Party was thrown out of office after 58 years of rule. The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) is losing votes in Namibia. Mozambique's FRELIMO party was declared the winner of recent elections only amid widespread allegations of vote-rigging, and has since killed over 300 protesters.

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