

South Africa's ANC government arrests 1,000 miners

Alejandro Lopez
8 August 2025

The African National Congress (ANC) government has launched a mass police operation to arrest 1,000 migrant gold miners. The miners are working without permits near Barberton, a town in the northeast of the country, close to the borders with Eswatini and Mozambique.

The operation is an extension of the ANC's violent Operation Vala Umgothi (Plug the Hole) that began with the Stilfontein massacre in January, where 90 miners, mostly undocumented migrants, died after police surrounded an abandoned mine, cutting off food supplies and forcing them to the surface. The horrific crime highlighted the ANC government's brutal response to the explosive social conditions developing in South Africa.

The latest phase targeted Sheba Mine, part of the Barberton Mines group in Mpumalanga province. According to police spokesperson Donald Mdhuli, on August 2, 2025, "About 1,000 illegal miners who are also illegal immigrants have been arrested," calling it "a joint operation between mine security and the police". More arrests are expected as there are still miners underground. With cold indifference, he remarked, "As they are coming out, they have been taken," before adding, "There are no fatalities recorded so far."

Following the strategy used in Stilfontein, police surrounded Sheba Mine, cutting off the supply lines to force miners to surface. This criminal tactic traps workers underground, ensuring their eventual arrest as they are unable to sustain themselves without food or water. The police, in conjunction with mine security, hold miners hostage in a life-threatening situation.

Barberton Mines attacked the miners, scapegoating them for sacking formally employed miners earlier this year. A statement read, "Earlier this year there was outcry from the community and employees when Barberton Mines retrenched workers as the mine was unprofitable and facing closure. Now we know the reason why! Food and supplies have been getting to a thriving illegal mining world underground, which had to be stopped, hence this intervention with the police and mine security. This message needs to be spread and illegal mining will not be tolerated."

The arrested miners, largely from neighboring countries like Eswatini and Mozambique, face charges including

"trespassing, theft of gold-bearing material, and contravention of the Immigration Act," according to the National Prosecuting Authority. For those with prior criminal convictions, the state intends to oppose bail. The case is to be postponed until next week.

Outside the court, family members expressed outrage at the government's actions. Protesters chanted, "Release our husbands! They are not criminals, they are trying to make a living." One protester told the media, "The mine is always killing our people [and] no one is arrested."

A woman, speaking in Zulu, condemned the government, stating: "You have taken our brothers, and locked them up. They have IDs and you locked them up with those who are foreign. Our brothers should be free. We know what they did is wrong, but the bigger problem is we are poor." She continued, "We do not have money for bail, the money they make is for survival, there are no savings."

Another woman added, "You want us to survive on the R350 grant (\$20). What are we supposed to do? We are vulnerable. We know what they are doing is wrong, but they are actually trying to make a living. The problem with locking them up now when they have been hoping to get jobs. Now they are going to get criminal records."

Another said, "Get these guys out! South Africa is corrupt. All of you are corrupt. They did not kill anybody ... You are treating them like murderers."

Another shouted, "South Africa is corrupt. These are our brothers, and now our community is suffering because they are gone."

These statements from South Africans highlight the devastating impact on the local economy, as many depend on the miners' income. Some also reflect solidarity with other Africans, forced to migrate and work under brutal conditions just to survive, in contrast to the whipping up of xenophobia by the political establishment and the trade union bureaucracy.

The ANC's barbarous actions are a devastating indictment of bourgeois nationalism and all the forces which have backed the ANC historically, above all the South African Communist Party (SACP).

Official unemployment rate reached 33 percent in the first quarter of 2025, with 8.2 million people unemployed. The

expanded unemployment rate, including discouraged work-seekers, rose to 43 percent. Youth unemployment stands at 46 percent among those aged 15–34. 55 percent of the population live below the upper poverty line of R1,634 (approximately \$88) per month, and 25 percent live below the food poverty line of R796 (approximately \$43) per month.

Mining in abandoned pits takes place in South Africa due to the social havoc wrought by the shuttering of much of the country’s mining infrastructure and the broader poverty fuelling a huge informal sector, with a workforce preyed upon by criminal syndicates. Another factor exacerbating the crisis is competition from lab-grown diamonds to South Africa’s diamond mining industry.

Under apartheid, the lucrative mining industry was built on rampant exploitation of black workers, who suffered extreme racial discrimination and restrictions on organizing by the Chamber of Mines to prevent any bidding up of wages due to competition between mine owners. This was aided by the recruitment of huge numbers of migrant workers from neighboring countries.

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

The ANC government, in alliance with the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), waged a war on the working class while elevating a small group of black petty-bourgeois to super-rich status. Patrice Motsepe became 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 beneficiaries of mining wealth include Tokyo Sexwale and coal mine owner Siphon Nkosi, who served as president of the Chamber of Mines. Mining wealth has contributed to President Cyril Ramaphosa’s sprawling fortune. The black working class—who still make up 80-85 percent of miners—continue to work in the brutal conditions.

Tens of thousands of zama zama miners, part of South Africa’s vast informal economy, make up a quarter to a third of the workforce. Lacking basic protections, they are subjected to hyper-exploitation, with their dangerous working conditions providing opportunities for criminal syndicates to thrive—often with political connections. Forced to work in abandoned mines, these undocumented miners sell the minerals they extract to mining companies or middlemen who profit from the illicit trade. This cycle of exploitation deepens their dependence on the underground economy, while mining corporations continue to profit from cheap, unregulated labor, avoiding responsibility

for the hazardous conditions.

For the South African ruling elite, the presence of migrant workers in the illegal mining industry serves as a convenient scapegoat for the problems facing the mining sector. Over the past four months, the ANC has arrested 1,826 miners, mostly migrants, including 1,128 Mozambicans, 473 Zimbabweans, 197 Basotho, and a Congolese and a Malawian.

The Stalinist leadership within the ANC is directly responsible for these barbarous attacks on workers. Gwede Mantashe, former National Chairperson of the South African Communist Party (SACP) is the current Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources. Under this capacity he has consistently supported the mining corporations and government’s crackdown on illegal miners.

Months after the Stilfontein massacre, Mantashe declared in parliament: “We collaborate with police, not only in Stilfontein, everywhere, and we love it. We love it.” Mantashe also whipped up xenophobia against migrant workers, accusing them of “raping our economy.”

As for the trade unions, they are also fully complicit. Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and COSATU have remained completely silent on the mass arrests.

Meanwhile, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which Ramaphosa once led, has backed the campaign, attacking mining companies for not doing more to support the crackdown and further inflaming xenophobia. In an interview to the media, a NUM spokesperson said “this illegal mining has been happening for sometime [...] The company is not doing anything. Instead, they are accusing our member of selling food to the Zama Zama miners. They forcefully take food from our members and this is causing a serious problem to our members who are now scared of going underground.”

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) that claims to be a left alternative to the ANC has remained silent.

What is needed is a truly socialist movement that defends the rights of all workers, whether local or migrant, against the violence of the state and the interests of capital. The solution to the mining crisis lies in the nationalisation of the mining industry, placing it under the democratic control of the working class. Only a socialist revolution that dismantles the capitalist state and reorders society in the interests of the workers can address the deep-seated inequalities and exploitation that have created this crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact