

More join South African strike as autopsies show miners were shot in the back

By Julie Hyland
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Many more have joined the strike at South Africa's Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, scene of the brutal police massacre of 34 workers on August 16.

London-based Lonmin—the world's third largest platinum producer—said that just 13 percent of its workforce reported for duty on Monday, down from 30 percent last week. Operations have ceased, with just one in 10 of the company's 28,000-strong workforce attending.

Several thousand reportedly gathered at Wonderkop hill outside the mine, near Johannesburg. Miners have vowed to not return to work until their demands are met.

Some 3,000 rock drillers have been on strike for over a fortnight. Working in extremely hazardous conditions for just \$500 a month and housed in squalid camps, they are defying the company's threat of mass dismissals in their fight for a 300 percent pay increase.

Operations at the nearby Canadian-based Eastern Platinum group (Eastplats) were also halted on Monday, as miners blocked drivers from bussing other workers into the site.

The hardening resistance came amid reports that autopsies prove most miners slain were shot in the back as they attempted to escape the police ambush on August 16. Johannesburg's *Star* cited an unnamed source involved in the investigation stating, "A lot of them were shot in the back and the bullets exited through their chests."

National police spokesman Captain Dennis Adriaio refused to comment.

If confirmed, the reports would destroy police claims that they had let loose with a barrage of live ammunition only after coming under fire from the strikers.

These claims were backed by the African National Congress government and its partners in the trade union federation COSATU and the South African Communist Party.

ANC President Jacob Zuma had called for action against the striking miners and almost certainly authorised the police shootings. The murderous assault has been defended by COSATU, the SACP and the National Union of Mineworkers.

Their claims that the violence was deliberately instigated by "criminals" and those involved with the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), a breakaway from the NUM, are directly responsible for the ongoing brutality against many of the striking miners arrested on public disorder offences.

Of the 259 miners held in custody since August 16, 198 have opened cases of assault against the police. There are accounts of strikers being packed into cells, pepper sprayed and then beaten by police with batons and other objects. Attorney Andries Nkone confirmed that some of the cases were "quite serious assaults, even attempted murder."

Moses Dlamini, spokesman for the Independent Police Investigative Directorate, said the assaults were alleged to have occurred in at least four North West police stations.

The labour unrest is rightly regarded by the ANC and its partners as a direct threat to its rule. At the weekend, ANC Secretary General Gwede Mantashe told a Young Communist League meeting, "Marikana was taken over and hijacked ... and out of it came counter-revolutionaries to undermine our movement."

He slandered the strikers before an audience that included COSATU President Sdumo Dlamini and SACP Deputy Chairman Thulas Nxesi. COSATU has stated that Marikana is the outcome of a "coordinated political strategy", with the aim of forming "breakaway unions". It has targeted AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa, expelled from the NUM in 1998 on the grounds of "ill discipline", and expelled ANC youth leader Julius Malema, who has attacked the government over the massacre.

Such claims are aimed at covering over the real causes of the Marikana events.

The bloody state repression of the rock drillers' strike reveals that the most ruthless forms of capitalist exploitation and social inequalities associated with the white Afrikaner apartheid regime are not only still practiced, but have become more entrenched.

Under the guise of "black empowerment", an elite from the ANC and COSATU have enriched themselves through their control of state power and their collusion with multibillion dollar corporations. Meanwhile, the conditions of life for the mass of black workers have deteriorated. Unemployment is officially 25 percent, and 45 percent among youth, while South Africa is now the most unequal country in the world.

Commenting in the *Financial Times*, former COSATU general secretary and ANC minister, Jay Naidoo, admitted that Marikana was a "wake up call for South Africa's Armani elitists."

Nearly two decades after the end of apartheid, he continued, "15m South Africans are only saved from starvation by the social grants they receive every month. In the context of vast structural unemployment the average worker supports up to eight people on a take-home minimum wage. According to labour force survey figures, 50 per cent of all workers earn less than R3,000 a month (\$350). Many of these workers are the sole income earners in their households."

Many workers have turned to more militant unions, or abandoned them altogether. This is especially the case in the mining industry. For decades, the NUM has been the main power base of the ANC, but its alliance with the government and the mine owners has seen it hemorrhage support. Its membership is now dominated by highly skilled and white collar personnel, while most underground workers are sourced from labour brokers. Employed on short-term contracts, they work long hours in mines surrounded by barbed wire and overseen by armed security guards and return home to substandard housing.

The trade unions have a vested interest in such superexploitation. Cyril Ramaphosa, a founder of the NUM for example, has an indirect stake in Lonmin through his investment company Shanduka. This setup is replicated throughout South Africa's main trade unions.

This accounts for the difficulties faced by the government and Lonmin in trying to end the strike at Marikana. Government-brokered talks are continuing, but one miner warned, "It's not AMCU or NUM that said we

shouldn't go to work—it's us, the workers, not the unions, so they are not going to tell us what to do."

Zolisa Bodlani, one of the five representatives chosen by the strikers to represent them in the talks, told SAfm's *AM Live* they were unsure if they would attend the meetings. Querying why the unions were to be involved in the talks, Bodlani said, "We are not willing to work with the unions... We also believe our unions failed us big time. We are not going to use any one of them. We don't want to be affiliated to any of the unions."

Commentators have drawn attention to the international ramifications of such labour unrest. Geoff Candy for the South African business web site *Moneyweb* noted that "while there is undoubtedly a political element specific to South Africa's forthcoming union and national elections in all of the events leading up to and away from the tragedy at Marikana, there is equally a feeling of discontent with current structures of power that is remarkably reminiscent in its feel, to the events of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement."

Martin Hutchinson, in Canada's *Globe and Mail*, went further:

"South Africa's mining-related unrest has a kind of prerevolutionary feel," he wrote. "The poor have gained little in 18 years of democracy. The gulf with the rich is huge, growth isn't what it could be, and the African National Congress leadership is complacent. It's no surprise that as, say, in pre-1917 Russia, militant opposition is rising ... If ANC bigwigs seem a bit like modern-day czars, then militant workers' groups somewhat resemble the Petrograd Workers Soviet."

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