

New strike wave spreads across South Africa's mines

By Thomas Gaist
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Over 1,500 chromium miners at Glencore Xstrata launched wildcat strikes beginning on May 28, which continued as of this writing.

The strikes began when two hundred miners downed tools at Helena mine in the Bushveld Complex. These 200 have already been fired by the company in retaliation, and ultimatums have been issued against the remaining strikers.

The firings add to the ongoing crisis of the mining industry, with preparations for salary talks in the face of mounting unrest.

The strikes are the most recent actions in a rising tide of militancy among South African workers. Lonmin and Anglo-American Platinum miners launched wildcat strikes beginning in mid-May, and over 10,000 South African clothing workers began striking in KwaZulu-Natal province on May 21.

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) has continuously sought to organize the return of striking miners to work. "There are channels to be followed ... go back to work so that your enemies will not take advantage of this situation," AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa told the workers.

Time and again, the AMCU has demonstrated its thoroughgoing hostility to a movement the working class against the corrupt African National Congress (ANC) regime.

The union bureaucracy is both terrified by and hostile to the developing class struggle. Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said on Thursday: "Nineteen years later in a democracy we are becoming the protest headquarters of the world; we call that a ticking bomb about to explode."

The bourgeoisie is denouncing the workers struggles for disrupting the flow of mining profits into the hands

of the South African and international capital. International banks have withdrawn \$610 million from the South African bond market in the past two weeks, amid the unrest.

Africa's largest economy saw a slowdown in GDP growth from 2.1 percent in the final quarter of 2012 to 0.9 percent in the first quarter of 2013, the slowest rate since 2009. The mining sector accounts for 60 percent of South Africa's export revenues.

President Jacob Zuma, for his part, blamed the deterioration in the economy on the militant workers: "The tension in the industry will not help the economy.... We could impoverish our country."

Zuma's threat that workers struggles will impoverish the economy is a contemptible provocation. In fact, it is his government that has worked ceaselessly with employers and the union bureaucracy—in the mines and throughout the economy—to keep South African workers on poverty wages.

Despite company representatives' claims that the mining giants are operating on "thin margins," Lonmin announced half-yearly profits of \$54 million in early May.

New rounds of wage negotiations are set for early June. According to Bloomberg, [South African] Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu and Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan have formulated a plan with platinum producers and other miners to combat any potential disruption to annual pay negotiations.

The attacks on the miners have reverberated throughout South African society, which is already characterized by deep social inequality and an official unemployment rate of 25 percent.

The strikes this month point to the explosive development of class conflict in South Africa over the

past year. According to South African Minister of Labour Mildred Oliphant, a total of 17,290,552 working hours were lost in 2012 as a result of wildcat strikes. “In 2012, a total of 99 strikes were recorded in the department strike data system. Out of 99 strikes, 45 strikes were classified as unprotected or unprocedural strikes,” she said in testimony to Parliament.

This wave of strikes follows last August’s massacre of striking miners in Marikana, when union violence against workers demanding wage increases culminated in a police massacre of 34 strikers—supported by the union bureaucracy and the ANC regime. The massacre showed the reactionary character of the ANC and the murderous hostility of the union bureaucracy to the working class.

None of the workers’ demands were met, and COSATU and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) collaborated with the state to drive the miners back to work in the fall of 2012, under threat of mass firings.

During the past month, workers affiliated with AMCU have been at the forefront of the wildcat actions. The AMCU leadership has sought to end the actions in a timely manner, however, letting off some steam without allowing actions to get out of hand. They are pledging themselves as allies of the bloodstained Zuma regime.

This week, AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa has claimed that the recent unrest could have been avoided if Zuma had been more willing to work with the breakaway union: “After the massacre, AMCU wrote a letter to President Zuma requesting a mining *indaba* [conference of leaders]. They didn’t respond. He missed a precious opportunity because he looked at the colour of the T-shirt that made the call and forgot to look at the nation. If he had, he wouldn’t be panicking like this today.”

According to *Financial Mail*, “Mr Mathunjwa said that neither the government nor the industry should fear bargaining negotiations with AMCU, which would engage responsibly and strive to reach an agreement.”

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