

South African platinum miners launch wildcat strikes at Amplats sites

By Thomas Gaist
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Nearly 5,600 platinum miners initiated wildcat strikes at Anglo American Platinum Ltd. (Amplats) sites Themblelani and Khuseleka late Sunday evening, disrupting production through this morning and into the afternoon. The immediate cause of the strike appears to have been the firing of 19 union shop stewards by the company in retaliation for their involvement in an earlier sit-in action. Amplats is currently engaged in negotiations with the unions over a plan to cut 6,000 jobs, a move that has provoked anger among the miners.

The strikes come as part of an ongoing wave of workers' struggles in South Africa. Last year's massacre of 34 miners at the Marikana mine by state security forces—carried out with the full support of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) bureaucracy—poured fuel on the already simmering class tensions in the country, producing a wave strike actions.

With the collaboration of the unions, the government was able to contain last year's militancy, but a new round of strikes has been building throughout the spring and early summer of 2013.

Wildcat strikes hit Amplats and Lonmin mines in mid-May, and the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) was instrumental in ending the strikes. "There are channels to be followed," AMCU president Joseph Mathunjwa told the miners at the time, urging an end to the strikes.

In mid-June, clashes erupted between 12,000 miners and security forces at the Amplats Rustenburg site, after the company delivered an ultimatum demanding that the miners return to work or be fired. Facing a barrage of rubber bullets, stun grenades, tear gas and water cannons, the miners set up barricades and

engaged in running battles with the police.

Now tension is rising again across the mining sector, with a fresh round of wage negotiations set for next month. In response, the ANC-led government is erecting a political, military and legal framework for mass repression against the working class. In early June, Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant raised the possibility of military forces being deployed throughout "the mining sector as a whole."

In tandem with the deployment of police and military violence against the workers, South Africa's elite is preparing measures to channel working class resistance behind the unions, which share common class interests with the mining companies and the state. Last week, ANC Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe brokered a "peace and stability framework" between the mining companies, government departments and the unions.

Motlanthe made clear the purpose of the framework, which is to defend the profit interests of South African and foreign capitalists, saying, "Investors really want to be sure. They want predictability, and so to the extent that through the framework we will be able to restore industrial peace and [provide] very clear channels for dealing with problems, that should give comfort to investors."

Amplats has issued a statement calling on the miners to embrace the peace and stability framework. "Anglo American Platinum would like to urge all employees and their union representatives to live by the spirit of the deputy president's peace and stability framework and to promote the peaceful co-existence of all the recognized unions at our operations."

President Jacob Zuma's government has worked tirelessly in coordination with the employers and the unions to repress the miners' struggles and maintain poverty-level wages to attract foreign investment. At

the same time, the mining companies continue to reap huge profits, with the platinum mining firm Lonmin announcing a half-yearly surplus of \$54 million in early May.

According to National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) spokesman Lesiba Seshoka, Amplats currently pays its workers a wage of between 4,000 and 4,500 rand per month (less than \$500). The miners perform life-threatening, backbreaking labor, for which they receive a poverty wage and are housed in squalid conditions.

The corporate-backed press is promoting the lie that the mining unrest in South Africa is “rooted in a union turf war.” This analysis is intended to cover up the underlying class conflict that is driving the upheavals.

While there is friction between the NUM and the AMCU, which compete over dues-paying members, the real root of the unrest is the struggle between South Africa’s working class on the one hand, and the ruling elites who control the mining companies, the state and the union bureaucracies on the other.

Despite the squabbles over turf, the union bureaucrats understand perfectly well that the basic threat to their privileges comes not from competing unions but from the working class itself. Their greatest fear is that the South African working class will organize independently for an all-out struggle against the capitalist system and the ANC government and unions, which defend it.

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