

Miners' struggles could end decades of ANC hegemony in South Africa

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South Africa, one of the world's major emerging markets, is about to tip into recession. Its currency has slipped to a historic low against the dollar. The country's stock exchange, at 320 per cent of South Africa's annual GDP possibly the world's most over-valued, is set for an almighty crash.

Indeed, the markets did almost crash in December when President Jacob Zuma sacked his neoliberal Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene, not because Nene was too much in the bosses' pockets, but because he opposed some of Zuma's more extravagant and corrupt deals with foreign airlines and nuclear companies. Only when Zuma two days later replaced Nene with Pravin Gordhan, another sworn neoliberal, did the markets stabilise; but by then \$28 billion had fled the country.

At the heart of South Africa's pending crisis is the downturn in China, its largest trading partner. This has led to a massive decline in demand for the country's commodities, especially platinum, coal and steel. China produces more steel than the world consumes, at prices that undercut South African steel by 10 per cent even after shipping costs. Unsurprisingly, manufacturing is in deep recession already.

This recession began in 2012 and dramatically accelerated in the latter part of 2015. And it has battered South Africa's mining giants, with Lonmin now trading at just 5 per cent of its 2012 value. But of course it is the working class, not the CEOs and major shareholders, who have suffered most.

Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost in manufacturing, telecoms and mining. Lonmin recently announced the loss of 35,000 jobs, while mining giant Anglo-American has shed 85,000 jobs, two-thirds of its workforce. And South Africa's unemployment rate was around 25 per cent even before these job cuts.

Their impact cannot be overestimated. Skilled workers, while exploited to an extraordinary degree, form the backbone of the South African working class, providing much-needed incomes and stability in otherwise totally impoverished communities. Officially, 53 per cent of the country lives below the poverty line, although analysts believe the true figure is closer to 63 per cent. South Africa remains the most unequal society in the world.

Unions

Yet the same group of workers are world renowned for their militancy. The 2012 Marikana strike is famous because the African National Congress (ANC) government, egged on by former miners' leader Cyril Ramaphosa, ordered police to open fire on the strikers, killing 43. But it has been followed by many other major walkouts, including the longest strike in the country's history by platinum miners in 2014.

For years, Apartheid-era bosses showed their contempt for the workers who made their billions, exporting their profits, while keeping their workers on starvation wages and housing them in unsanitary compounds.

Now the capitalists are preparing to destroy the country's mines. The only way to stop them is to strike all-out, occupy the threatened mines and demand the ANC government nationalise them without compensation and under workers' control. Politically this means breaking the unions from the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) that has kept the unions under control since the fall of Apartheid.

The biggest union, the metalworkers' NUMSA has already done this, and has been expelled from union federation COSATU in the process. Unfortunately NUMSA has failed to deliver on its promise to form a new, revolutionary socialist party or to launch its United Front with other unions and community organisations against the neoliberal offensive. NUMSA also failed to take any of the other COSATU unions with it, and is now probably bankrupt. AMCU, the breakaway miners' union, has also shrunk from its demand for nationalisation.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), formed by former ANC youth leader Julius Malema, despite some courageous and supportable campaigns, are marred by Malema's corruption and the cult of personality that surrounds him. A linkup between the EFF and NUMSA has also failed to materialise.

Nevertheless, this crisis is so severe that it may blow the post-Apartheid alliance that binds the working class to its own bosses apart. The key to that lies with the rank and file of the unions, the network of community organisations and the socialist groups.

If they can link up their struggles and build councils of action with delegates from workplaces and neighbourhoods, then a new party can rise from the ashes of the ANC and SACP; and the COSATU unions can play as revolutionary a role as they did in the 1980s, when they brought apartheid capitalism to its knees.

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