South African miners rock the ANC

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Over the past two months, miners have brought production of gold and platinum in South Africa to a halt in a series of militant wildcat strikes and the strikes are spreading. The struggle has been a costly one in terms of human life. The death toll, largely amongst the strikers presently stands at 48.

Given the deepening effects on South Africa’s economy of the world recession - Moody’s has just downgraded its credit rating and predictions of GDP growth continue to be lowered - it is clear that the country is headed for class struggles that could reach revolutionary proportions.

The miners’ strikes alone have the potential to shake government and business to the core. And so dependent is the world economy on South African gold and platinum it could have global repercussions. But if strikes spread to other sectors then a fully blown revolutionary situation could rapidly develop.

A wave of struggle

Workers are demanding wage increases up to 16,000 rand (about £1,200) a month following the victory of the Marikana strike last month. Unrest is spreading to other mining sectors and beyond.

Anglogold Ashanti, the country’s biggest bullion producer has seen work at its mines halted by a walkout of 35,000 miners. The Gold Fields company has faced shut down as 24,000 of its workers have walked out. At Kumba Iron Ore, 300 strikers blockaded the giant Sishen iron ore mine in Northern Cape province. All these strikes are illegal under South Africa’s still extremely restrictive labour laws.

And it looks as if worker discontent is spreading to other sectors such road transport, with 20,000 drivers on a two-week official pay strike. Shell is reporting its inability to fulfill its petrol supply contracts and the transport union involved, SATAWU, has announced it will call out workers at railways and ports next week, a development that would cripple coal and other mineral exports.

On 5 October, the world’s biggest platinum producer, Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), sacked 12,000 striking miners after three weeks of wildcat strikes by 28,000 workers had cost it £51m in lost revenue. The strikes at Amplats have reduced production, forcing the world price of platinum to a five-month high of about £1,000 an ounce ? more than the value of a worker’s monthly wages.

The strike has seen clashes between picketing miners and police in which one worker was killed. Heavily armed police have attacked strikers, outlawing their marches and using rubber bullets and water cannon.

But workers fought back, making the strike more effective by the use of flying columns of strikers, bringing out different mines on strike and closing a fifth of them at any one time.

Amplats’ action in sacking a huge section of its workforce is clearly aimed at holding the line for all mine owners against the widespread demands for the raising of wages and working conditions to a common
decency level following the victory of the workers at Marikana. It is a risky strategy.

Marikana victory

Miners at the Marikana platinum mine won a pay rise of 22 per cent, raising wages to about £900 a month, which is more than double what most were earning before the strike. One workers’ leader at the mine told Reuters: "It's a huge achievement. No union has achieved a 22 percent increase before."

The Marikana miners had to face the total intransigence of their employers added to the armed might of the South African state. Thirty-four miners were shot dead by the police on 16 August and then more than 200 of them were arrested by the justice department for being responsible for the deaths of their colleagues under an Apartheid law. Only a national and international outcry forced the government to release them.

But still not one policeman has been charged for the murders.

Meanwhile, the ANC government has reacted to the current round of strikes by sending more troops into the striking areas. Last month, President Jacob Zuma told parliament in Cape Town that the government would crack down on anybody stirring up trouble. "It is not just the miners striking. It is also some people of some description who are going there to instigate miners. We are going to be acting very soon."

Zuma put in place martial law and authorised the deployment of soldiers alongside the South African Police in the mining areas, a potentially dangerous move. He plainly intends to defeat the miners on behalf of the companies but also on behalf of the Cosatu and NUM bureaucracy who have scabbed on the workers' struggles and done everything possible to isolate and defeat them.

And, despite formal government regrets over the Marikana massacre, the killings of workers continues. Police killed a miner at a demonstration with rubber bullets and another was killed when he was run over by an armoured car.

ANC betrayal

Despite the pledges of three ANC presidents since the fall of Apartheid, little has been done to improve the lives of millions of black workers. The World Bank reported in July that:

- Unemployment stands at around 33 per cent.
- The top 10 per cent of the population receive 58 per cent of the income
- The poorest half of the population receive only 8 per cent of the income.
- The Gini co-efficient, a global measure of inequality, stands at 0.7 - one of the highest in the world and higher than it was under Apartheid (0.66).

The much talked about “black empowerment” has meant the empowerment and enrichment of an ANC elite and their business cronies. The old white elite have held onto their incomes, their farms and investments. Instead the ANC has become the darling of the neo-liberals at the World Bank, IMF and OECD as it handed South Africa over to the fat cats at the head of the multinationals.

The head of Anglo American mining, Cynthia Carroll, earned £2.2m last year and Ian Farmer, who heads Marikana’s owners Lonmin, took home £1.2m. Meanwhile, their employees work in dangerous conditions and are being killed by the police for demanding £1,000 a month.
Corruption of the unions

Serving the billionaires in London and New York are the bureaucrats of the ANC and the trade union federation, Cosatu. For example, the ANC’s Cyril Ramaphosa was the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the late 1980s when it led 300,000 workers on strike against Apartheid. Now, he is a multi-millionaire, sits on the leadership of the ANC and on the board of directors at Lonmin, which paid him £61,000 as a non-executive director last year.

One miners’ leader at Marikana mine told the New York Times: “We made the ANC what it is today, but they have no time for us. Nothing has changed, only the people on top, and they just keep getting more money.”

The ANC’s business relations with the bosses also impacts on the unions. Officials in the once-militant NUM police the union and attack those fighting for better wages. It has led to a split in the union, with the Association of Mine Workers and Construction Union (MWCU) taking a leading part in the Marikana miners’ strike.

So bitter was the dispute in the mines between the unions that the NUM tried to blame the MWCA for the massacre. It was the militant opposition to the bosses by the MWCA that forced Lonmin to agree a deal that satisfied both unions.

Former ANC youth leader Julius Malema has visited the strikers and made speeches in their support. He has defended them from vilification and attacked the role of the ANC in selling out the promises it made in the days before the downfall of Apartheid.

But his motives are utterly self-serving? basically to oust Zuma and his cronies within the ANC. Were he to succeed there could be little doubt that he would defend capitalist exploitation and succumb to corruption as Zuma did before him.

In fact, the records of betrayals and corruption are a natural result of the whole strategy of the ANC and its inspirer the South African Communist Party. Its Stalinist theory dictated an extended stage of capitalism after the end of Apartheid. Meanwhile, the workers would have to be patient. The ANC governments under Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma carried out this programme to the hilt.

It meant workers had to work for the same bosses at the same pitiful wages while the natural riches of the country flowed abroad or at best into the pockets of a few South African middlemen, whether black or white didn’t make much difference to them. The land remained largely in the hands of those who stole it a hundred years ago.

Housing, education and medical facilities improved at a snail’s pace for the dwellers in the shantytowns. The miners still suffered under a brutal regime in the mines for pitifully low wages. Yet it was the workers of South Africa in the townships and the mines who waged the revolutionary struggle that eventually brought down Apartheid. They were robbed of the fruits of their victory.

Twenty years on, the new uprising of the miners holds the potential to right this wrong and resume the South African revolution.

But this time it needs to be rooted in Leon Trotsky’s strategy of permanent revolution. This starts from the struggle for today’s burning necessities (a living wage, a decent house, schools, clinics etc) but goes on to deal with the unburied corpse of Apartheid in terms of inequality and reactionary labour laws, taking the road of workers’ control of production and posing the anticapitalist measures that will lay the foundations of
That is why the task of building a revolutionary party in South Africa is an urgent one. The workers and the poor in South Africa need a party that is made up of the trade unionists who are leading the mining strikes; it needs workers from industry and the land, it needs the networks of community activists and the anti-privatisation forums, it needs the unemployed youth of the townships and the students from schools and colleges. If all these forces come together, now, to support the miners, the transport workers, then the foundations of such a party can be laid in the months and years ahead.

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