

One Year After Marikana Tragedy in South Africa

Farlam Commission stalled while exploitative conditions continue

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South Africans have commemorated the first anniversary of the Marikana massacre where 34 mineworkers were shot dead by provincial police in Rustenburg. The miners had been on a wildcat (unprotected) strike that had been marked by violence between security forces and the workers as well as clashes involving rival labor unions.

2012 was one of the most intense years of class struggle since the fall of apartheid and the ascendancy of the African National Congress (ANC) to power in 1994. Both “protected” and “unprotected” industrial actions spread throughout the mining industry and other sectors of the national economy.

The source of the conflict within the platinum, gold, iron ore and other extractive sectors stemmed from the capitalist-owned and managed mining firms which are seeking to exploit the workers in order to gain higher rates of profit. Despite the realization of democracy in 1994, the wealth of South Africa is still largely controlled by the largely-white ruling class that is allied with multi-national corporations and financial institutions.

With the global capitalist system in the worse crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the bosses are demanding even deeper cuts and overall concessions from their employees. These contradictions came to the fore last August when workers were insisting upon huge pay raises, better working conditions and increased investment in the infrastructure of the mining towns.

Challenges Posed to the Working Class and National Democratic Movements

An alliance of the ANC along with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) has served as the pillar of the post-apartheid society. Although this coalition of left and democratic forces led the anti-racist struggle and won state power for the representatives of the African majority and other oppressed nationalities, the masses yearn for full independence and control of the arable land and the means of industrial production.

Unrest in the mining sector along with agriculture, municipal services and manufacturing has worsened over the last year due to both internal and external factors. The decline in the value of the South African rand, the fluctuation of the prices for strategic minerals and the failure to significantly improve the working conditions of miners and their families created a highly explosive social situation in the country.

In a statement issued by the ANC ruling party it recognizes that “A year since Marikana happened, the African National Congress continues to mourn the lives of the striking miners,

security guards and policemen who died during the most tragic unrest since the dawn the democracy. Our thoughts are with the many families, friends and colleagues who lost loved ones and whose lives were altered forever on those fateful days.”

COSATU, which is still the largest trade union federation inside South Africa, also issued a statement on August 15 noting “There was an overwhelming concern that never again must we see such killings in our democratic South Africa. Tragically however, one year later, we cannot say that there have been no further deaths. Just days before the anniversary, NUM woman shop steward, comrade Nobongile Madolo, was murdered near the Lonmin mine, the latest victim of a wave of politically motivated killings in the area around Rustenburg.”

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has been in a struggle with the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) over representation of workers in the North West Province around Rustenburg. At present at the Lonmin mines in Rustenburg AMCU is recognized as the majority union and has taken a hostile position towards the NUM.

COSATU expressed its frustration that the investigation into the violence in the North West mining industry which was mandated by the government of President Jacob Zuma has failed to address the fundamental issues leading up to developments in August 2012. A recent agreement signed by NUM and the mine owners to restructure the industry has not resulted in significant changes in working conditions.

This same statement continues “The 11th Congress (of COSATU) welcomed the Independent Judicial Commission of Inquiry appointed by the government to investigate all the events leading to that fateful day. It is therefore bitterly disappointing that one year later, the Farlam Commission is bogged down in procedural arguments and still far from reaching any conclusive verdict on why the massacre occurred, who was responsible or what measures are needed to prevent any occurrence.”

With specific reference to the intransigence of the mine owners, COSATU says it “welcomed the Framework Agreement for a Sustainable Mining Industry, signed by organized labor (with the exception of the National Confederation of Trade Unions (NACTU) and AMCU), organized business and government on 3 July 2013. It committed all role-players to both fundamental transformation of the whole mining industry, and immediate steps to stop the killings and bring those responsible to justice.”

However, the COSATU statement illustrates that “These however remain words on paper. No-one has been arrested for any of the deaths before, during or since the Marikana massacre. A culture of impunity remains throughout the area. Workers and communities live in constant fear. Our fundamental human right to move freely without fear of attack has been shattered.”

The South African Communist Party (SACP) also criticized the operations of the Farlam Commission in investigating the developments surrounding the Marikana massacre. In a statement from the SACP it says that “instead of a well-focused commission of inquiry the proceedings have been turned into a lawyer-heavy, quasi-criminal court process, starring a bevy of highly paid advocates and their teams. Some of the lawyers appear to be more interested in vying for the limelight and claiming billable hours, than in making a serious contribution to establishing a common understanding of the tragedy.”

In order to prevent further police violence and to improve the conditions of the miners these

issues must be approached from a revolutionary political perspective. The underlying causes of violence, state repression and poverty in the industry derive from the unequal distribution of the wealth of South Africa which is created by the working people themselves.

Consequently to address these contradictions the mines must be seized by the workers and the state in order to take control of any restructuring efforts. The operations of the mining industry must serve the interests of the workers and the people of South Africa in their determination to eradicate poverty, underdevelopment and economic exploitation.

Even after two decades since the demise of the racist-apartheid system, COSATU points out "The mining industry is also characterized by remnants of apartheid. For decades employers exploited and promoted tribalism, racial segregation and discrimination, which are still to be found in many mines. Racism is institutionally entrenched through continued occupational segregation. While 83.7% of the total workforce in the industry is black, 84% of top management remains white! 72% of middle management is white, and 68% of professional workers and artisans are white."

At present the mine owners in the platinum facilities are proposing large-scale lay-offs similar to what has occurred in the gold-producing sector. In order to wage a struggle against the further impoverishment of the working class the union leaders must come together to hammer out a program of struggle aimed at ensuring that the mine ownership be transferred to the majority who provided the labor to run these operations for so many decades.

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