

## CHAPTER 5

# Exploding Anger: Workers' Struggles and Self-Organization in South Africa's Mining Industry

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It is well known that South Africa's mining industry was founded upon the extreme exploitation of Black workers. From its very origins, the industry was steeped in blood and violence. To amass an army of labor to work the mines, millions of Black families were forcibly driven off their land right across the country by the colonial military, beginning in the mid-1800s. Once on the mines, Black workers lived in closed compounds where they were subjected to military-style control and, until the late 1970s, faced prison terms for breaking their work contracts. The notorious apartheid pass system originated in the mining industry, and the ghettos that became known as townships had their forerunners in the infamous mine compound systems.<sup>1</sup> On the back of this exploitation and oppression, mining corporations in South Africa became exporters of huge quantities of minerals, including gold and diamonds.

Even today, racist attitudes permeate the mining institutions. Workers, especially Black workers, are poorly paid. On a daily basis they are still subjected to harsh control, racist slurs, oppression, and humiliation. The mines themselves remain sites of tight security, with workers regularly subjected to body searches and even iris and fingerprint scanning in the name of supposedly reducing theft. Security at the mines is prison-like with barbed wire and electric fences cordoning off sections of the mines, and heavily armed security guards keeping watch over workers' movements.<sup>2</sup> Companies like G4S, which are often contracted by the mining houses to undertake security, boast that they offer trained armed guards and dog units for control of riots or labor "unrest," intelligence-gathering operatives, and the ability to conduct screenings of any

employee.<sup>3</sup> The anarchist Bakunin described the situation accurately when he observed that, for an employee in a workplace under capitalism, an “employer will watch over him either directly or by means of an overseers; every day during working hours and under controlled conditions, the employer will be the owner of his actions and movements... when he is told: ‘Do this,’ the worker is obliged to do it; or when he is told ‘Go there,’ he must go.”<sup>4</sup>

South African mines have some of the worst working conditions and safety records in the world. Each year, hundreds of workers die in accidents underground, while thousands more die of work-related diseases such as silicosis.<sup>5</sup> The mining bosses in South Africa don’t particularly seem to care about this because, after all, for them it is only insignificant “others” dying underground. The mining sector in South Africa, however, is merely a reflection of the attitudes and practices of the broader society. The ruling class as a whole in the country treats the majority of people with utter disdain or, at best, with condescending paternalism. For bosses and politicians, workers and the poor in South Africa are simply human fodder for the country’s mines, factories, and electoral machine. Understandably, being subjected to such a dehumanizing system has stoked a seething anger among workers and the poor, which has often exploded into struggle and direct action in the form of community protests and wildcat strikes.

During the last few years the anger toward the system and the exploitative ruling class has once again erupted: this time in the form of a series of wildcat strikes and sit-ins at South Africa’s mines, with the most well-known at Lonmin’s Marikana Mine in the far north of the country. The main grievances have centered on issues with deep historical roots: the racist attitudes of management, unsafe working environments, precarious working conditions, unpaid wages, and inadequate wages.

The struggles at the mines not only reflect the ongoing class warfare in the mining industry but they also bring into the spotlight the cruel exploitation of South African workers in general: they expose the true face of class rule in the country, reveal the many problems within existing unions, lay bare the role of the state in society, and reveal yet again that the Black working class experiences not just exploitation but ongoing national oppression—and accompanying racism—in South Africa. This chapter explores these issues as it tracks the details of the wildcat strikes and sit-ins on South Africa’s mines, and discusses the necessity of taking these struggles forward.

### **Battle Lines Drawn**

The battle at South Africa's mines burst vividly into the open in 2009. Up to this point strikes had been common but were mostly channeled through the country's labor laws. In 2009, however, workers went outside of the labor law and over the heads of the bureaucracy of the main mining union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and began to take the fight to bosses across the mining sector. Between August and December 2012 the sit-ins and wildcat strikes had escalated to the point that workers at most of the mines in the country were out or had recently been out on wildcat strikes, and others were staging sit-ins and occupations or had recently done so.

The origins of these massive wildcat strikes and sit-ins can be traced to the first mine sit-in in recent history, which occurred at the Crocodile River Mine, a platinum mining operation, in July 2009. In order to try to avoid adhering to aspects of South Africa's labor legislation and to lower the costs of employment, the management of Crocodile River Mine hired contract workers through another company, JIC, operating as a labor broker. In fact, a large percentage of the Crocodile River Mine workforce was employed as contract workers, which meant that legally the mine did not have to implement any proper health and safety workplace standards.<sup>6</sup> For the workers this also meant they could be fired more easily than permanent workers, they could be paid less, they could be denied benefits that permanent workers were entitled to, and they could be denied the right to work in a safe environment.<sup>7</sup>

For these reasons the contract workers at Crocodile River Mine engaged in picketing, among other actions, to persuade the bosses to hire them on a permanent basis. Initially, the workers were supported by the NUM, the largest union in the country. The protest actions appeared initially to bring some success, as management promised that all contract workers would be hired on a permanent basis and their grievances addressed.<sup>8</sup> Months passed and this failed to materialize. Frustrated, 560 contract workers decided to occupy the mine on July 9, 2009, in a bid to get management to meet their demands. They shut down the mine's operations and blockaded themselves underground. The mine bosses were caught off guard, as were officials from the NUM. From the start it was clear that the workers were undertaking the action through self-initiative. Upon hearing of the occupation, the NUM sent officials down into the mine to try to persuade the workers to end their sit-in. The workers refused. Soon after, the mine management called in the police and acquired a court interdict against the workers.

Throughout the two days of the sit-in, negotiations continued between the NUM and the bosses until eventually an agreement was reached. The agreement stated that a new round of negotiations would take place between management and the union to consider the possibility of hiring all the contract workers on a permanent basis. Upon hearing the news, the occupying workers decided to surface. Yet as soon as the workers had exited the mine, management once again reneged on its promises and fired all 560 workers involved in the occupation. Adding insult to injury, the police also charged the workers with trespassing and kidnapping. These draconian actions made clear that the state and the Crocodile River Mine were intent on intimidating the workers and preventing the spread of mine occupations.

However, the strategy of trying to terrorize workers into abandoning the idea of staging mine occupations proved a dismal failure, as in the weeks following the Crocodile River Mine action another sit-in occurred, this time at the Aquarius Platinum Kroondal Mine in Rustenburg. The Kroondal Mine sit-in had its roots in a strike that occurred in the platinum mining sector in August 2009. Workers across Rustenburg—at both the Kroondal Mine and mines owned by another company, Impala Platinum—went out on strike for higher wages.<sup>9</sup> Most of the workers were members of the NUM and were demanding at least a 14 percent increase. From the start the strike was marked by a high degree of militancy, which could be seen during the workers' protests.<sup>10</sup> Several days into the strike, the negotiators from the NUM announced they had reached an agreement with the bosses and that as a result workers could expect a 10 percent increase. Workers at both Impala Platinum and the Kroondal Mine were angered by this concession and felt the union bureaucracy and negotiating team had sold them out. Most of the workers continued to strike.

Officials from the NUM then rushed to Rustenburg and tried to intervene to bring the strike to a halt. At Impala Platinum's Rustenburg mine, they received a hostile reception from the workers. When the NUM deputy president insisted that the workers accept the corporations' offer and return to work, some of the workers responded by throwing stones and physically attacking him.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, at the Kroondal Mine, the workers remained out on strike and refused to budge. Due to the NUM's acceptance of the wage offer, the continuing strike action lost its protected status and officially became a wildcat strike. The Kroondal Mine's management used this as a pretext to fire the 3,900 workers who had elected to continue the strike.

The workers self-organized protests to demand their reinstatement. During the protests the national police and mine security harassed the workers, opened fire on them on numerous occasions, and set trained dogs on them. It was reported by the Democratic Socialist Movement that, as a result, three strikers were killed, and many went "missing."<sup>12</sup> Under intense pressure from protesting workers themselves the Kroondal Mine managers were eventually forced to reinstate the workers. Yet as soon as the workers returned to work, they discovered that the bosses had erased their employment histories and had terminated some of their benefits. This prompted a second wildcat strike. Once again management fired the workers involved and refused even to issue their Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) certificates.<sup>13</sup> At this point, thirty-two of the workers decided to embark on an underground sit-in at the mine.

The workers managed to get through the mine's security systems and gained access to the underground section of the mine, attempting to barricade themselves in. They stated that they would not resurface until they had been issued their UIF certificates so they could claim the unemployment benefits they were due. Management summoned the police. On arriving, police task force members descended into the mine and proceeded to try to arrest the workers and to force them out. In the ensuing altercation, some of the miners and a number of police force members were injured. The police allege that the injuries involved workers setting off explosive booby traps to avoid being arrested.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, all thirty-two of the workers participating in the action were arrested and charged with attempted murder, malicious damage to property, trespassing, and assault.<sup>15</sup> Sadly, NUM officials also turned their backs on the workers. In the aftermath of the occupation the NUM released a statement saying, "We, therefore, call on the law enforcement agencies to ensure that those who are involved in all these irregular activities are arrested and that no one disguises criminal activity as labour matters."<sup>16</sup>

While the Kroondal Mine occupation was being ruthlessly crushed, another mine occupation erupted in Mpumalanga, at the Two Rivers Mine. In October 2009 more than one hundred workers staged a sit-in underground to demand that a racist manager be fired and four of the workers he had dismissed be reinstated. Within hours hundreds of workers had joined in the sit-in and completely shut down production.<sup>17</sup> The bosses clearly felt pressured by the workers' actions, and they agreed to investigate the conduct of the manager and to reinstate

the four workers. By early November, however, the four workers had still not been rehired. In response, 1,400 workers decided to once again occupy Two Rivers.<sup>18</sup> They remained underground for more than forty hours until management finally gave in and took concrete steps to reemploy their four colleagues.

With this apparent victory, the occupation was called off. Yet despite the promises of the Two River Mine bosses, there was no investigation into the manager in question and anger among the workers continued to boil beneath the surface. Matters were compounded when management failed to pay workers their year-end bonuses and overtime. As a result, in mid-January 2010, about fifty workers embarked on another wildcat strike and sit-in.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, several hundred kilometers away, more than a hundred workers at the Bokoni Mine also decided to occupy their workplace and refused to leave their shifts. Their demands and reasons were similar to those of the workers at Two Rivers Mine: they wanted the appalling safety standards at the mine addressed, they wanted the bonus system reexamined, and they wanted a racist manager to be fired.<sup>20</sup>

As with the mine sit-ins of the preceding months, the workers involved in these two occupations had undertaken them independently of the unions, the NUM and the Association of Mineworkers Union (AMCU). As such, the workers' actions were based on self-initiative and self-organization. When officials from the unions learned of the mine occupations, rather than supporting the workers, they called for them to end immediately. NUM officials went so far as to accuse the workers involved of kidnapping NUM members and holding them hostage. They also called for the police to intervene and end both occupations.<sup>21</sup>

The owners of the Two Rivers and Bokoni mines, African Rainbow Minerals (ARM) and Impala Platinum, embarked immediately on an intimidation campaign to try to force the workers to surface. Traditional leaders were called in by the mining companies to instruct the workers to end the sit-ins, but workers remained in the mines.<sup>22</sup> When this failed, the two companies obtained court orders to evict the workers.<sup>23</sup> The workers simply ignored the court orders and continued with the sit-ins.

On January 19 a large police contingent was sent down the Bokoni Mine with the intention of forcing the workers out. Under the threat of violence the workers elected to end the occupation.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, when the police presented an interdict to the Two Rivers Mine workers on the same day, they too decided to resurface.<sup>25</sup> While the NUM said they would engage with the workers and management to address the reasons

behind the occupations, an NUM spokesman also said the union was pleased that the occupations were over and that production would soon be back to normal.<sup>26</sup> As happened with all preceding occupations, management at the Bokoni Mine also went on the attack in the aftermath and fired the hundred workers involved in the occupation.

### **Struggles Continue into 2011**

In 2011 a number of protected strikes, revolving around formal wage negotiations with the main unions such as the NUM also occurred in the coal and gold mining sectors.<sup>27</sup> Workers were demanding 14 percent increases. Bosses initially offered far less. After several days of strike action, a deal was struck between the NUM and the mining houses. Despite the partial victory, the workers' anger continued to build.

This anger exploded soon after, when subcontracted workers at Platmin, a mine in the North West Province, embarked on a wildcat strike in June 2011 to improve working conditions. This strike occurred outside the formal NUM structures and was marked by a high degree of militancy.<sup>28</sup> Shortly before this, at Lonmin's Karee Mine, nine thousand workers went out on a wildcat strike, in May 2011.<sup>29</sup> One reason for the strike was dissatisfaction with the NUM bureaucracy; some participants were defending a local worker leader in an internal battle with union officials. The Karee Mine strike lasted more than a month and was brought to an end when the owner, Lonmin, with the backing of the NUM bureaucracy, fired all nine thousand workers.<sup>30</sup> In order not to further disrupt production, however, the company rehired many of the fired workers once the action was over. More specifically, they rehired the workers on a selective basis, excluding those seen as having been militant, ringleaders, or "trouble-makers" during the strike action. Of the nine thousand workers initially fired for being involved, only six thousand were rehired, with the most militant being sidelined.<sup>31</sup> What was significant, however, was that even the workers who were rehired left the NUM en masse and joined the rival union, AMCU.

Australia Platinum's mine in the Limpopo Province witnessed a similar story of deception by management. When workers staged a wildcat strike demanding improved working conditions, and the direct hiring of outsourced workers in 2011, management promised to look into their grievances if they returned to work. The workers agreed to this. However, upon their return, disciplinary hearings were subsequently called by management for some of the workers. At the hearings, the workers involved were promptly arrested in an act of blatant

intimidation by management and the police.<sup>32</sup> In all these cases it was clear that the police and companies were escalating the existing tensions at the mines through these underhanded and repressive tactics.

### **The Battle Intensifies**

While the period between 2009 and 2011 was punctuated with wildcat strikes and sit-ins, 2012 witnessed a major escalation of the struggles at the mines. Victories were scored by the workers involved, which saw the fires of struggle grow and the strikes assume a form of militancy—and threat—not seen since the massive mine strikes of 1987, 1946, and 1922.

Indeed, 2012 began with a six-week wildcat strike at Impala Platinum, with rock drillers demanding a wage increase from 4,000 rand to 9,500. The demand and subsequent strike arose out of a situation in which the NUM had negotiated wage increases for some higher-paid workers but had left out the rock drillers from the deal. The rock drillers began a process of self-organization, deciding to embark on a strike and demand their own increase.<sup>33</sup> As part of this, they vowed to organize outside of the union and used assemblies and a strike coordinating committee to do so. In solidarity, the rock drillers were joined by other workers, and eventually seventeen thousand workers at the company went out on strike.<sup>34</sup> The strike's approach was militant from the beginning, with workers barricading the road leading in and out of the mine. In a related action, workers also barricaded the road to a nearby informal settlement to prevent anyone from potentially acting as a scab.<sup>35</sup> Businesses in the surrounding areas were also looted as workers took food and other items. The police were deployed in full force and, as a result, the violence escalated. Battles between the police and mineworkers were relatively frequent. The police used rubber bullets, tear gas, armored cars, and helicopters, while workers fought back with rocks and stones.

From the start the NUM was opposed to the strike. Many workers at Impala, therefore, grew increasingly unhappy with the NUM bureaucracy and local NUM officials, who they felt were too close to the bosses, and with the leadership of the parent federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), which many felt have been too close to the ruling party.<sup>36</sup> Consequently some, but not all, of the striking Impala workers left the union and, of these, many reportedly joined AMCU—the strike committee, too, had given its support to AMCU. It was, however, clear that AMCU was not involved in organizing the strike, which was self-organized by the workers directly. In the end, and due to the militancy of the strike, the workers won their full demand—an



increase from a basic salary of 4,000 rand to a guaranteed salary of 9,500 rand per month.<sup>37</sup> The victory scored spurred workers at other mines to also take action.

In the weeks that followed, seventeen thousand workers at Anglo Platinum's and ARM's Modikwa Mine, the largest platinum mine in the world, undertook a protected strike for higher wages. Although initially operating within the labor law and under the auspices of the NUM, the strike quickly escalated. Workers barricaded roads in and out of the mine and clashed with the police.<sup>38</sup> Early August 2012 saw action once again at the Aquarius Platinum Kroondal Mine. Hundreds of mineworkers who had been fired by a subcontractor—Murray and Roberts—for an earlier wildcat strike embarked on a protest to reclaim their jobs. Their attempt to gain access to the mine resulted in clashes with the company's armed security guards and the police, who fired on the workers with shotguns. The workers armed themselves with stones and allegedly even petrol bombs. In the process three of the workers were shot dead by security guards and the police.<sup>39</sup>

August 2012 also saw the infamous events at Marikana. The wildcat strike at Marikana began when rock drillers—low-paid and often outsourced or contract workers—demanded that their salaries be increased to 12,500 rand from a basic-salary low of 4,500 rand per month in some cases. To organize the strike the workers met in mass assemblies. Tensions also existed at Marikana regarding the NUM, and many of the striking workers felt that the NUM officials were too close to the bosses. Many of those workers were also members of the NUM. On August 11, the striking mineworkers marched to the local NUM offices to put pressure on the union to assist in taking up their issues. The local NUM officials were hostile to this action and attacked the marchers. During this encounter, the local NUM officials opened fire on the strikers. Two of the strikers were shot in the process and were left lying in pools of blood, believed to be dead.<sup>40</sup>

At the time, the police claimed to know nothing of this, which, in the light of evidence that has emerged, was a lie. Through the Farlam Commission, the judicial commission investigating aspects of what took place at Marikana, it was confirmed in February 2013 that the eyewitness reports of August 11 were indeed correct: NUM officials had shot at the protesters, who, despite being severely wounded and left for dead, actually survived.<sup>41</sup> In the aftermath of the violence, strikers armed themselves with sticks, knobkerries, and pangas to protect themselves from future attacks. Violence between some NUM officials and some

strikers—but by no means all—also escalated, with at least four NUM officials and full-time shop stewards killed in the conflict.<sup>42</sup>

Two days later, on August 13, more violence occurred, again starting out as violence directed at the strikers. On that day, a delegation of striking workers was sent by the strike assembly to cross over to Lonmin's other operation, the Karee Mine, with the aim of convincing workers there also to come out on strike. Discontent had been rife at Karee since the 2011 wildcat strike and subsequent firing by management of thousands of workers. Mine security, however, turned the striking workers' delegation back. On the way back to Marikana the workers' delegation was stopped by a line of heavily armed police. They were told to lay down their knobkerries and other weapons. The delegation refused, saying the weapons they had were necessary for self-defense, as strikers had already been attacked and killed. The police line reportedly parted and initially allowed the workers through, on the face of it appearing to have accepted their explanation. But after the workers were about ten meters away, eyewitnesses have claimed, the police opened fire and some began chasing the workers. With support from a helicopter, the police shot dead two of the workers and severely wounded another. The rest of the workers turned on the police, and in the ensuing clash two policemen were killed. A number of the workers were arrested on the scene and charged with murder, despite having been fired on first.<sup>43</sup>

On August 16, the police publicly declared that it was "D-day" for the strikers.<sup>44</sup> To protect Lonmin by breaking the strike, the police shot dead thirty-four striking workers. Some reports maintain that the workers captured on TV being shot by the police may not have been storming the police, as was claimed, but rather were fleeing Nyala armored cars that were firing tear gas at them. Whatever the case, the police showed little hesitation in gunning down the workers. In fact, many of the police were armed with R5 assault rifles—weapons based on the design of the AK-47. Orders for the police to carry such assault weapons, and for them to be armed with live ammunition, must have come from high within the state.

The workers shot in front of the TV cameras were also reportedly a minority of those killed. It has been reported that other workers fled in the aftermath of the shooting, headed toward the Marikana informal settlement. Some reports indicate that a number of workers may have been run over by Nyala armored cars as they lay flat in the grass, concealing their presence to avoid being shot. Other workers also reportedly tried to flee into a boulder field four hundred meters in the opposite

direction from the TV cameras. It has been claimed that they were then pursued into the boulder field on foot or via helicopter by police task force members, and evidence has emerged that some of these workers may have been executed there.<sup>45</sup>

Although the massacre of workers in front of TV cameras may not have been premeditated, the fact that the state announced it was “D-Day” and the fact that some protesters were shot in the back and others were shot at very close range in the boulder field make it clear that the state had intended to break the strike that day one way or another.<sup>46</sup> It is evident that the state and the bosses had decided the strike would end, and the police would handle that, all in the name of protecting private property and the economic interests of the mine owners.

Even after the massacre, the strike continued for six weeks and worker assemblies persisted. The state, however, made it exceptionally difficult to do so by banning all gatherings in the area of more than fifteen people. Police also made regular incursions into the townships surrounding Marikana. In the process, the police subjected these communities to violence, which included firing rubber bullets and tear gas at striking workers and residents venturing out of their houses.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the workers’ struggle held firm, and through this pressure, Lonmin—Marikana’s owner—agreed to wage increases providing rock drillers up to 11,000 rand a month.<sup>48</sup> In the end, the workers won the battle through a massive campaign of self-organization.

### **The Wildfire after Marikana**

Taking a cue from the workers’ actions and victory at Marikana, wildcat strikes spread across South Africa’s mines like a raging fire. Self-organized wildcat strikes erupted at most of the operations of the largest mining companies, such as Amplats, Goldfields, Kumba Iron, AngloGoldAshanti, Harmony, and Gold One. In fact, it is estimated that between August and December 2012, well over a hundred thousand workers in the industry went out on wildcat strikes at various times at different mines. In every single case, workers demanded wages of 12,500 rand or higher.

Sit-ins and occupations were also part of these struggles. At Goldfields’ Kloof Mine, 5,200 workers staged a sit-in,<sup>49</sup> and at Samancor 400 workers occupied the mine,<sup>50</sup> while in the Northern Cape Province workers occupied diamond and iron mines.<sup>51</sup> At the Sishen Iron Mine, owned by Kumba Resources, workers staged an occupation on the site for several weeks.<sup>52</sup>

These recent wildcat strikes and occupations—post-Marikana—have met with varying degrees of success. At some mines gains were won, at others management held out. By January 2013, the wave of strikes began to ease as workers regrouped. Tensions, however, remain high and a new round of battles looms—again around higher wages, but also now retrenchments. In fact, in March 2013 wildcat strikes once again broke out, this time in the coal mining sector. At one point almost 90 percent of Exxaro’s coal operations workers were in fact out on a wildcat strike.<sup>53</sup>

As part of the wildcat strikes that South Africa has witnessed, mass workers’ assemblies and committees have sprouted up across the mines, aimed at organizing actions locally. Indeed, there is a relatively long history of mine workers establishing assemblies and committees to take their struggles forward.<sup>54</sup> Some attempts have also been made by the workers to link the workers’ assemblies and committees in the aftermath of Marikana. These developments have even led to the establishing of a national strike coordinating committee, which has continued to function.

The officials from the main unions, the NUM and AMCU, were largely sidelined by the strikers across the mines, despite some of the strikers being members of the unions in question. In the case of NUM officials, they were to a very large degree hostile to the wildcat strikes and sit-ins as well as the formation of committees. While in a few isolated cases they provided the strikers with some assistance and placed blame on the bosses for the problems, NUM officials called for the wildcat strikes of 2012 and 2013 to end. In fact, the top bureaucrats at the NUM spent over a million rand in a campaign to end the wildcat strikes and sit-ins. Along with accusing the strikers of endangering South Africa’s economy, the general secretary of the NUM called on mines not to give in to the demands of workers. In fact, he said, “You need just one mine to break this strike.”<sup>55</sup>

In part, NUM, due to a reformist political strategy in the trade union leadership tied to the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the labor bureaucracy has been hostile to the strikes. In addition, the leadership is committed to formal central bargaining and social dialogue, which excludes workers and further encourages bureaucratization of the unions. Many of the top union officials’ jobs are dependent on the bureaucracy, including researchers, negotiators, and political officers. As such they favor stable labor relations within the framework of the law and oppose open class conflict. Indeed, registered unions are required to stay within the confines of the labor law and the union

bureaucracies try for the most part to ensure this happens—if they don't, or if they support actions outside of the labor law, they can be fined and even deregistered, meaning their jobs could be put in jeopardy.

Union officials also negotiate long-term agreements with the mines, often spanning years. The unions also have massive investment arms owning shares in many sectors of the economy. These investment arms are capitalist speculators in their own right. The wildcat strikes threaten these agreements, arrangements, social dialogue, and the power held by the union officials tied to them. In short, workers taking actions themselves, going over the heads of the bureaucrats, undermines the authority of top union officials and they don't like it. In addition, union officials have become relatively privileged and have grown distant from the base membership of the unions. The 2012 annual salary of the general secretary of the NUM was a staggering 1.4 million rand.<sup>56</sup> Even full-time paid shop stewards at the platinum mines receive company salaries to do union work full time, and some receive 14,000 rand “bonuses” every month too.<sup>57</sup> Understandably, the companies paying these salaries expect something back from these local officials. For many of the local, regional, and national bureaucrats, therefore, union work is a stepping-stone to a cushy career, and workers' struggles become a secondary issue. This has led to anger among many workers, and it is one of the reasons some local NUM officials were attacked by sections of the strikers at Marikana.<sup>58</sup>

### **The State and Capital Regroup for Attack on Authentic Workers' Unions**

The state and the bosses have been trying to halt the wildcat strikes and undermine the workers' assemblies and committees that have emerged. Post-Marikana these efforts have become more systematic. Across companies there have been meetings about the struggles on the mines and how to deal with them. The state, too, has met with corporations around the issue. This has included drawing in unions to promote collective bargaining.

The state, for its part, has also targeted key activists post-Marikana to try and neutralize the workers' committees that have been formed. Communities that supported the struggles have also been subjected to police action and raids, especially in areas such as Marikana. This has also included shooting at workers with live and rubber bullets, with the consequences being that many strikers have been injured and some others killed,<sup>59</sup> although not on the scale of Marikana.

The mining houses, too, have gone on the offensive recently. Many workers involved in wildcat strikes and occupations, across the industry,

have been fired. Notably, the company Harmony Gold has locked out workers from its Kusaalethu mine in retaliation for the wildcat strikes at the company in 2012. As part of this, workers have been denied access to the mine hostels where they lived.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, AngloPlatinum is in the process of retrenching thousands of workers in a barefaced bid to punish those who were involved in wildcat strikes and sit-ins at the company.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Lessons to Be Drawn from the Struggles at the Mines**

Major lessons regarding the nature of the capitalist economy, the role of the state in society, the makeup of the contemporary ruling class in South Africa, and the continued exploitation and racial oppression of the working class can be drawn from the events surrounding the wildcat strikes and sit-ins at South Africa's mines. Today, the wealth of the ruling class still rests mainly on extremely cheap Black labor: it is the reason certain sections of the economy, mining for one, are so profitable. Since 1994 the entire working class has fallen deeper into poverty, including sections of the white working class, as inequality has grown between the ruling class and working class as a whole. However, the Black working class, due to holding mostly the lowest-paid jobs and facing continuing racism, remains subject to both exploitation and national oppression. Until both are ended, along with the capitalist system on which they are based, true freedom and equality for both the Black and white working class will not be achieved in South Africa.

As has been brutally highlighted by Marikana and the other actions at the mines, ending of the national oppression and accompanying racism to which the Black working class is subjected must be central to the struggle to end capitalism. As anarchists have long observed, if a just society is to be achieved, the means and the ends in struggle must be as similar as possible. Hence, if we want a genuinely equal and nonracist society, our struggle to end the national oppression of the Black working class, and the accompanying capitalist and state systems in South Africa, must be based firmly on nonracial ideals.

While it is clear that the Black working class remains nationally oppressed, the situation for the small Black elite, nevertheless, is very different. Some, through their high positions in the state, and consequently having control over the means of coercion and administration, have joined the old white capitalists in the ruling class. They have used their positions in the state to amass wealth and power. Others have also joined the ruling class through the route of Black economic

empowerment. This is evidenced by the fact that all the top ANC-linked Black families—the Mandelas, Thambos, Ramaphosas, Zumas, Moosas, and others—have shares in or sit on the boards of mining companies.<sup>62</sup> In fact, Cyril Ramaphosa not only owns shares in and sits on the board of Lonmin, but a number of functions at Marikana are also outsourced to various companies he has interests in, such as Minorex.<sup>63</sup> The wealth and power of this Black section of the ruling class in South Africa rests, too, on the exploitation of the working class as a whole, but mostly and specifically on the exploitation and national oppression of the Black working class. This is why the Black section of the ruling class has been so willing to take action—whether during platinum strikes, Marikana, or strikes in general—against the Black working class.

Mikhail Bakunin foresaw the possibility of such a situation arising in cases in which national liberation was based upon the strategy of capturing state power. Bakunin said that the “statist path” was “entirely ruinous for the great masses of the people” because it did not abolish class power but simply changed the make-up of the ruling class.<sup>64</sup> Due to the centralized nature of states, only a few can rule: a majority of people can never be involved in decision-making under a state system. As a result, Bakunin stated, if the national liberation struggle were carried out with “ambitious intent to set up a powerful state,” or if “it is carried out without the people and must therefore depend for success on a privileged class” it would become a “retrogressive, disastrous, counter-revolutionary movement.”<sup>65</sup> He also noted that when former liberation heroes enter into the state, because of the top-down structure they become rulers and get used to the privileges their new positions carry, and they come to “no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people.”<sup>66</sup> History has proven Bakunin’s insights correct; former liberation heroes in South Africa rule in their own interests, they wallow in the privileges of their positions, and they exploit and oppress the vast majority of the people in the country.

The blatant state violence during the struggles at the mines, and the very real threat of a reactionary backlash, also lays bare the true nature of the state and the role it plays in protecting the ruling class. It is not an unfortunate coincidence that the state, headed by Black nationalists and neoliberals, has been protecting the mines of huge corporations and has been willing to use violence to do so. Rather, that is one of the main functions of the state (and hence its police): that is what it is designed for. For capitalism to function, and for class rule to be maintained, a

state is vital. It is central to protecting and maintaining the very material basis from which the power of the elite is derived. Without a state, which claims a monopoly on violence within a given territory, the elite could not rule, nor could it claim or maintain ownership of wealth and the means of production. In fact, the state as an entity is the “defender of the class system and a centralised body that necessarily concentrates power in the hands of the ruling classes; in both respects, it is the means through which a minority rules a majority.”<sup>67</sup> Through its executive, legislative, judiciary, and policing arms the state always protects the minority ownership of property (whether private or state-owned property), and tries to squash, co-opt, or undermine any threat to the continuing exploitation and oppression of the working class. As Marikana and other struggles at South Africa’s mines show, that even includes killing those who pose a threat.

### **What Is to Be Done?**

The actions of the workers on wildcat strikes and sit-ins have been for the most part inspiring. Important structures, including workers’ assemblies and committees, have been created. Distinctly not inspiring were the actions of most of the union officials involved, which did not just abandon their members but sometimes even actively worked against them. In turn, this led to a minority of workers taking out their frustrations by attacking local union officials in a few cases. The series of occupations revealed once again that workers in South Africa face enemies not only in the form of bosses and politicians, but also sometimes in the form of union officials. As such, if workers are going to emancipate themselves they are going to have to struggle against bosses and politicians as well as a union bureaucracy.

Indeed, what is perhaps really needed in South Africa is for workers to reclaim their unions from a bureaucratic layer and to transform them into self-managed, radically democratic, nonhierarchical, and decentralized unions—in other words, unions controlled from the bottom up by the members themselves and not by officials with centralized power. It is in this struggle that anarchists can make a huge contribution with our knowledge of anarcho-syndicalist unionism and ideas of self-management, self-organization, and opposition to hierarchies. Of course, the challenges in attempting to transform the existing unions into participatory organizations are immense. It has not been unknown for the unions to send officials from their head offices to intervene in, and in some cases even block, meetings to discuss the need for bottom-up,



participatory unions. Some union officials have resorted to sidelining and even expelling members who raise difficult questions about the growing centralization within unions. Despite this, the struggle to bring about self-managed, nonhierarchical, revolutionary, and radically democratic unions or organs is vital—whether through transforming existing unions or beginning to organize new ones.

The workers' assemblies and committees that have emerged are highly important developments. They could prove to be a way for the workers to take up struggles outside of the unions and beyond the reach of union bureaucracies. Some weaknesses need to be addressed if the committees and assemblies are to become structures through which workers could take their struggles forward in the long run. It is clear that structures of direct democracy need to be firmly established, consolidated, and built on in these assemblies and committees.

If the committees and assemblies are to go forward, it is also imperative that a healthy, working-class-based counterculture be entrenched and fostered within them. The task, therefore, for the moment is to build the assemblies and committees. The workers have shown no intent so far of fighting to gain control of the unions, and at present any move to do so would be distraction from the vital work needed to maintain the current battles. At a later stage, workers could elect to use the committees and assemblies to mobilize to remove the union bureaucracies and effectively regain full control of their unions. But what is needed now is for the committees and assemblies to become durable. If they don't they will disappear and workers will have to start again.

The strength of the worker assemblies and committees has been that they have united workers across unions, they have drawn in nonunionized workers; some have also included the unemployed and community members. The assemblies and workers' committees have the potential to become a counter power to the multinational mining companies, supported by the South African state. To do so, however, depends on the workers building and sustaining these organs themselves. It is apparent that the state, the ruling party, the South African Communist Party, capital, and most union officials are going to try to prevent this.

What is also clear, however, is that workers in the mines are going to continue struggling in the future. The wildcat strikes, sit-ins, and occupations may go through ups and downs, but they won't disappear. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in South Africa is how to begin to transform the actions we have seen into a real challenge to the ruling class through a long-term battle by the working class to seize the mines,

land, and factories and to fight for worker self-management. Of course, the best process for such a transformation is through struggle itself and the self-education that accompanies it. It is also in this context that anarchists can offer solidarity and support to these workers. This could involve sharing our vision and ideas—without trying to dominate or impose—around a free, nonhierarchical, and self-managed society: in other words, a society that is the antithesis of the oppressive one in which we are currently forced to live.

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