

Global Issues

Marikana Massacre and Strike Violence Post-Apartheid

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Introduction

The massacre of 34 workers by the South African state police on 16 August 2012 almost two decades after the democratic transition poses questions about the workplace order and post-apartheid dispensation. It raised pertinent questions on South Africa's socio-economic and political order and the integrity of the industrial relations regime. This paper outlines the underlying socio-economic and political factors and how the workers understood this. Explaining the context is important as it helps account for the choices made by the different stakeholders.

The Genesis

The Marikana strike was not an isolated event but was connected to the industrial relations regime and the broader post apartheid order. The strike was part of an unprecedented strike wave which blighted the country. This started in January 2012 at world number two producer Impala platinum mines and spread to coal, iron and other sectors. The strikes were characterised by unprecedented worker militancy.

The Impala strike started as an insurgency by rock drill operators (RDOs) challenging an employer unilateral decision to award mine blasters an 18 percent retention allowance. They demanded a 200 percent wage adjustment (from R 3000 to R9000 per month) and were uncompromising. They from the onset were clear that the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which then was the only recognized union, must not be involved. Many viewed their demands as outrageous. The Impala strike is therefore crucial in explaining the Marikana massacre and strike and the underlying meanings and dynamics at it set a pattern.

The Impala strike was characterised by high levels of intimidation and violence affecting different stakeholders. The workers from the onset rejected representation by the recognised trade union, the NUM and the formal industrial relations institutions. They in place nominated impromptu independent committees to advance their demands. Demands were presented sometimes unrehearsed at the shafts to the local management before this culminated into a fully fledged strike action.

The other workers were drawn into the strike partly through coercion, intimidation and persuasion. The workers managed to connect the strike to the broader community struggles and further elevated the action. An unemployed member of the community explained: 'We saw that it was clear the police was prepared to use brutal force as a result we had no choice as a community, we had to support the cause of the workers'.

In a new union, the Association of Mining and Construction Union (AMCU) emerged strongly challenging the hegemony of the established National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). From the onset it was apparent that a new era in South African industrial relations was unfolding.

Fragmentation and Social Distance

The problem of worker fragmentation and social distance is important in understanding the underlying dynamics. The changing nature of employment driven by global economic changes and neoliberalism has seen an escalation in the fragmentation of how work is done and organised. Neoliberalism as a system thrives on fragmentation. We have seen proliferation in the externalisation of work designed to minimise risk and maximise profits. In platinum mining this has ironically been paralleled by a boom in the sector. Platinum mining now has the highest level of third party employment in South Africa (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2010). This severely undermines trade unions' organising potential.

The attainment of democracy has also seen the demise of the hostel system of accommodation. In the past almost all the black mine workers exclusively lived in hostels and never constituted part of the local communities adjoining the mines. Hostels have been since their inception centres of worker control. Initially they functioned as centres of worker control for employers and to preserve an economic and political system that was based on the super exploitation of black workers (Wolpe 1972). Following the second wave of unionisation of black miners in the 1980s, the new union which emerged, the NUM, subverted the employer logic of using hostels as centres of control into centres of union mobilisation (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2010).

This has since changed as the post apartheid dispensation is characterised by a new spatial order. Mine workers now live in RDP¹ houses, informal settlements, villages, family units and in high and low density suburbs. This is tied to race, class, ethnicity, gender etc. The majority of the low level skilled employees live in the informal settlement. The story of how the workers were organised in different spaces reflects fragmentation. AMCU and the independent workers committee organised primarily in the informal settlement whilst the NUM in the hostels. The new settlement pattern also reflects the fragmentation of solidarity.

Mineworkers in the past used to organise as unskilled black workers. This has changed in the new dispensation as we have seen the broadening of skills for black workers. This has fragmented and undermined workers' solidarity.

The problem of social distance is also important in explaining the underlying meaning and dynamics. Of the two groups, the union (NUM) and the workers committee (later AMCU), one significant observation was the use of different languages to address almost the same people. NUM used English and other local languages whilst AMCU and the committee used *Fanakalo*² for different reasons. The NUM argued that Fanakalo is a slave language designed to denigrate black people and therefore must be disbanded. On the other hand AMCU argued that it was a language of hard work which united a diverse group of workers and builds and reinforces a sense of collective solidarity. The difference in the choice of language is important as it is an expression of social distance between the workers and the unions.

The workers interviewed argued that the recognised union, the NUM has become alienated and divorced from their daily reality and experience. They highlighted that the union

representatives are not in the same 'class terms' as the workers they represent. At both Lonmin and Impala most of the union representatives live in the more affluent suburbs while the majority of the low skilled are in the informal settlements.

The Lonmin Marikana Strike

Like many others, the workers at Lonmin were inspired by the outcome of the Impala strike. This became their point of reference. The Lonmin RDOs started organising subversively from June 2012. They were uncompromising and demanded a wage adjustment outside the collective bargaining framework. The Lonmin strike followed a similar trajectory characterised by analogous claims repertoires and high levels of worker militancy. The strike action was again championed by the RDOs because of their strategic location in the mining production process. The workers rejected NUM and elected independent committees. The popular support usurped by the new union AMCU which emerged during the strike was unprecedented and shocked the NUM and management.

The level of militancy, demands and determination heightened by the time the strike unfolded at Lonmin mines because the workers had a reference point. The Lonmin management initially responded differently from Impala. In light of what had happened at Impala the Lonmin management engaged the workers outside the union and collective bargaining framework. They offered the RDOs a shift allowance of between R500 and R750 which however was vehemently rejected by the workers. The Lonmin management later backtracked and declined engaging the workers outside the recognised union, the NUM.

The RDOs who were later joined by other workers organised a series of *toyo-toyis*³ to exert pressure and push for their demands. The first was to the central management at Marikana to present a memorandum of demands. They were demanding R12500 per month for an RDO. Management refused to accept the memorandum arguing that this was outside the recognised union and industrial relations framework. The workers organised the second offensive to the union branch office to demand its hands off from what they perceived as their struggle. The stakes were too high for the NUM given how events unfolded at Impala and its subsequent loss of appeal to its membership. Thus in a desperate attempt to extinguish the strike, the NUM branch officials opened fire at the march.

Initially it was reported that two RDOs were killed as a result of the NUM shooting and several injured. This marked a turning point which transformed how events unfolded. This was a misfortune and the workers wanted an explanation. They summoned a *sangoma*⁴ to help them explain the crisis.

After this shooting some of the workers may have sought vengeance. This characterised a series of clashes that ensued with the police and mine security. In these clashes a number of security guards and police officers were killed. A number of union representative, scabs and some of the workers were also killed in various confrontations and assassinations. The workers were evicted and barred from meeting at the usual company stadium. They thus converged at a nearby rock outcrop adjacent to the sprawling Nkaneng informal settlement where many of them live. This is attached to cultural symbolism. In Xhosa culture when there is a crisis in a community, the men usually converge in the nearby mountain/kopje or near the cattle kraal if it's a family issue to try and resolve the crisis.

The strike was not embraced by all the workers. They were not a homogeneous group but had different interests. When the strike leaders heard that a subcontractor at shaft K 3 was not on strike volunteers were dispatched to 'convince' the workers to join the strike. The use of violence in this regard was apparent and a means to enforce compliance.

These clashes culminated into the Marikana massacre in which at least 34 workers were killed by the police. Although the workers and their committee declared that they were independent or not aligned to any of the union it was apparent they were hostile to the NUM but sympathetic to AMCU.

Industrial Conflict, Institutionalisation, Violence and Muthi

Industrial relations have become highly institutionalised post the democratic transition in South Africa. The system is designed to have capacity to manage industrial conflict and strike violence. Drawing from Dunlop's (1958) thesis on industrial relations; the system is characterised by rules of the game which the players will always strive to defend. It was not surprising that in these strikes both the management and the union attempted to defend the standing industrial relations system on conflict resolution.

In the midst of the strike Lonmin management argued:

'The manner in which these issues were raised was unacceptable...(as) there are structures and procedures within the organisation for raising these issues...any engagement outside NUM would be breach of recognition agreement' (Lonmin 2012).

It was clear that management and the recognised union, the NUM, positions were congruent from the onset of the strike. The alignment of the employer and the union in defending the institutionalised industrial framework is not surprising. The employer and the union both declared the strike unprotected and attempted to convince the workers to abandon the action but to no avail. Impala responded by discharging 17,000 workers. This represents bargaining through flexing muscles. It resulted in the suppression of the workers' voice and in turn the workers responded by intensifying the strike action.

Violence in the strikes was part of the organising order. Workers blocked buses and platforms and shut off all the roads leading to the various work stations. They targeted scabs especially in the early shifts from dawn. By the time the Impala strike ended at least three people were killed, 58 injured and 29 hospitalised. They were all assaulted on their way to work and believed the perpetrators were their colleagues punishing them for reporting for duty. Interviews with those assaulted indicated that this happened whilst they were on their way to work. Three of the workers were murdered, several had broken arms, skulls, lacerations and various other injuries. They were attacked with stones, axes, machetes and other weapons.

The violence by and against workers took many forms. During the Impala strike a video showing two men and women scabs forced to strip naked and 'toy toy' was distributed through mobile phones and DVDs and went viral. This incident was however, later discredited by the management as not authentic. However, damage had been done already. The intention was to intimidate those who were against the strike action, especially the women.

The shafts that are adjacent to the informal settlements were more volatile and violent. Some of the strike leaders summoned a *sangoma* from Eastern Cape and acquired guns for protection from the police and company security.

Violence escalated and extended into the unions as intra and inter union violence. National Union of Mineworkers' Union shop stewards were assaulted by members at a feedback meeting at Impala Platinum. The NUM was forced to shut down all its offices at Impala Platinum because of the upsurge in violence against the union. It moved all staff to its regional office in Rustenburg town. Some of the NUM shop stewards had to go underground.

Whilst the new union AMCU addressed the workers unarmed and unguarded, the NUM shop stewards attempted the same and were severely assaulted. The management, NUM and COSATU national executive had to address the same workers under heavy police guard and barricades.

Violence is an ambiguous phenomenon. In strikes it may be a reflection of lack of solidarity and order. Workers used violence to disturb the discourse and assert a new order. Police respond violently to protect the employer order. Violence is destructive and corrosive as shown in these strikes. Some of the workers including those who defied the strike action lost their lives. However, the other side of violence is about unity and solidarity. It may be the only means of forging worker collective solidarity in the face of fragmentation.

In the face of formidable challenges, the workers turned to other means to attain and sustain solidarity. The violence in the strike may be viewed as a result of lack of solidarity and on the other hand a means to attain and sustain solidarity.

African traditional beliefs remain salient alongside Christianity and other forms of religion. From the onset of the strike wave at Impala, workers throughout drew strength and solidarity from traditional spiritual and healing techniques i.e. *sangoma* and *muthi*⁵ to gain strength and solidarity. In African mythology *sangomas* are crucial in explaining misfortunes. They for example, answer questions such as why us, why now is a misfortune happening etc. In many ways *sangomas* promote group solidarity and maintain morale in a crisis. The Marikana workers exhibited high levels of militancy and solidarity in the face of fragmentation. How was this attained and sustained?

The worker militancy and solidarity was not only attained and sustained through violence. *Muthi* is connected to cultural values and beliefs of African black people. *Sangomas* and *muthi* assisted workers in building social solidarity. In explaining the role of religion, Emile Durkheim emphasised the importance of collective worship. This is when the social group comes together in religious rituals 'full of drama as a group to express their faith in a common value and belief' (Jones 1986).

To explain the role of *sangomas* and *muthi* we have to explore the function of religion in society. Flint (2008) describes religion as set coherent answers to the challenges of human existence that make the world meaningful. Religion plays an important role in the lives of humanity and in the community in general. From a functionalist perspective, society needs a certain degree of social solidarity which can be attained through religion. Durkheim argued that religion strengthens the unity of a group and promotes social solidarity. In the African religious discourse, it is the *sangomas* who communicate with the ancestors and have supernatural powers. *Muthi-sangoma* is part of mineworkers' daily reality wherein they draw spiritual explanation, solidarity and protection.

Conclusion

Mining in South Africa has been characterised by coercion and super exploitation of black workers from its onset in the late 1800s. The basic structure of this regime remains intact to date. The new neoliberal dispensation thrives on fragmentation and exploitation of workers as highlighted in platinum mining in South Africa. It attempts to rationalise the continuity of the past regime. As a result, the life of mine workers is characterised by fragmentation, violence and precariousness. The fragmentation has many dimensions i.e. in the way work is done and organised, where workers live and how they are organised, and others. Fragmentation severely undermines worker collective solidarity.

Strike violence, as highlighted in this paper is ambiguous. On one hand it highlights a lack of solidarity whilst on the other it may be a means for forging worker collective solidarity. It thus may be a means to overcome the fragmentation. The use of muthi and sangoma is another means by the workers to re-establish solidarity. Thus the fragmentation may be viewed as fictitious and not insurmountable.

Trade unions are formed by the workers to advance and articulate their interests. However, there is always an inherent risk that they may be captured and serve a contradictory role. The unions, state and the mining employers as highlighted, are part of an established order perpetuating worker exploitation and subjugation.

NOTES

1. Government sponsored houses which targets benefiting the poor and unemployed.
2. A pidgin (simplified language) based primarily on Zulu, with English and a small Afrikaans input.
3. A dance/march expressing defiance and protest.
4. African traditional healer.
5. African traditional medicine or talisman.

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