

# Don't let politicians get away with murder!

Why was the African National Congress (ANC) deputy president, Cyril Ramaphosa, and National Planning Commission (NPC) chairperson, Trevor Manuel, disrupted when they spoke at the Great Hall at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). **Claire Ceruti** and **Luke Sinwell** explain.

**P**olitical power is neither fixed nor monolithic, says Gene Sharp, a renowned American scholar. Power begins to be transformed when strikes, sit-ins, strategic disruptions, road occupations and marches demonstrate that power does not lie only in the hands of elites. Elites prefer to rely on the consent of ordinary people to maintain their legitimacy, but readily turn to coercion – heavy policing, for example – when mass action starts to challenge their authority. At times like these, they need our consent more than ever – and deserve it less than ever.

When prominent ANC politicians Trevor Manuel and Cyril Ramaphosa came to give lectures at the Wits Great Hall, they may have expected that their authority would be respected. But the Marikana Support Campaign (MSC) – made up of individuals and community organisations including the Makause Community Development Forum, Thembelihle Crisis Committee, and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee – had organised alongside the communities and workers of Marikana to ensure, amongst other things, that these politicians were held accountable for the role that they played in the Marikana massacre in 2012.

The first event was the Ruth First Memorial Lecture at Wits which was delivered by Trevor Manuel on 29 August 2013. We attended as Wits alumni and members of the MSC. The miners wanted, above all, to ask the former finance minister – now chair of the NPC – why government would not fund their legal team at the commission of enquiry. The miners' legal team had, at that stage, withdrawn from the commission when the R5.5-million private funding had dried up, while the state continued to fund police lawyers who had already drawn R7-million of taxpayers' money. This was no abstract question of justice for the miners, because the commission's findings will undoubtedly influence the court case of the 270 miners who were arrested, beaten and then charged with murder on the day of the massacre. Subsequently, as a result of sustained pressure from below, the High Court in Johannesburg ruled that the miners' team should be funded by government.

About 50 of us demonstrated outside the hall in order to publicise our discontent with Manuel and other politicians who we understood were implicated in the Marikana massacre. We wanted to know whether the cabinet meeting the day before the massacre had authorised the use of live bullets.

As a minister, Manuel attended that meeting. From an email written by Ramaphosa which can be found in the transcripts of the Marikana commission, we knew that that meeting was going to discuss how to deal with the strike.

When the lecture was about to commence, we left our placards outside so that we would not jeopardise our chance to speak, having been led to understand that the audience would be allowed to engage with the speaker. We listened quietly for an hour while Trevor Manuel, who is now responsible for implementing the National Development Plan (NDP), spoke on the topic *After Marikana: Migration and Mining*. Before the lecture, the names of the 34 miners who were killed during the massacre were read out. But those who survived the massacre were not invited to give their version of events. None were allowed to respond to the minister's impersonal characterisation of the horror that was visited upon these men and women, nor were we afforded our right to interrogate an elected official at a public event – something which should surely be standard to democracy.

Manuel's hypocrisy during the lecture was breathtaking. He deflected attention from his own role by saying he did not want to



ANC deputy president, Cyril Ramaphosa.

‘prejudice or anticipate the findings of the [Marikana] commission’ but then pronounced on the historical, causes of the massacre for an hour as if no humans had decided to issue the police with 4,000 live bullets on 16 August 2012.

Manuel attributed the ‘tragedy’ to ‘unjust apportionment of economic gains for over a century and a half, leading to one of the highest levels of inequality in the world’ – as if he had no hand in the economy during his 15 years as the finance minister who implemented the Growth Employment and Redistribution (Gear) economic policy. Inequality increased in South Africa under his watch. Liebbrand, Finn and Woolard calculated that in 2008, the top 5% of South Africans earned 43% of the total income, whereas in 1993, towards the end of apartheid, the top 5% earned 38% of the total income. Manuel also made it possible for multinationals like Lonmin to send profits from platinum mined in Rustenburg to

shareholders in London. Economists Sam Ashman and Ben Fine estimate that 20-25% of South Africa’s gross domestic product (GDP) now leaves the country. The NDP, Manuel’s proposed solution to inequality, has no mechanism to reverse this bleeding.

An MSC leaflet read, ‘Had Ruth First been present, she would have expected transparency, to uncover the truth, but most importantly she would have demanded a workers’ perspective’. When First headed a research unit, she allocated 40 researchers to exposing the conditions of Mozambican mineworkers. It was ironic that here at her memorial lecture, miners who had travelled for two hours straight from their underground shifts in order to address the minister were to be sent home without airing their views.

It was necessary for us to interrupt the proceedings when it became clear that questions were not going to be allowed. We are

accustomed to politicians, potential vice-chancellors, and famous people being cross-examined by the public in the Wits Great Hall. It would be shameful if the Great Hall became a space to merely legitimise the self-serving views of the powerful, who have many other ways of getting their views across.

One of us therefore called out from the back of the hall: ‘When is discussion time, please? When is our chance to ask Trevor?’ and another, ‘We are workers here. From Marikana.’

When the chair dismissed our request we continued: ‘We’d like to know how someone who gave the go-ahead for Lonmin to export all its money can still be talking as if he’s solving inequality... We want to know how it is possible that his cabinet was ignorant about what the police minister was doing.’

‘Hold the music,’ someone shouted in isiXhosa, while another group of miners walked towards the exit in disgust.

Anton Harber, a professor in journalism and media studies at the University of Witwatersrand, claimed he was ‘sorry, but out of respect to everyone in this hall’ and ‘out of respect for Ruth First’ we should allow proceedings to continue.

‘Ruth First was going to give us a right to talk and to discuss about inequality,’ replied an MSC member from Rustenburg, ‘... so we need to scrutinise Mr. Trevor Manuel!’

Shortly after this, Wits security pushed us out of the hall (before we could carry out our threat to leave) showing, as one of us put it, that ‘They just want to tell their own side. They don’t want our side heard.’

Ramaphosa, a mine clerk who became prominent in the formation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) from 1982, appeared in the Great Hall two weeks later, on 10 September, to promote the NDP. Ramaphosa caught the eye of big business as

one of the ANC's key negotiators during the transition and black empowerment share deals made him one of the richest South Africans. With an estimated wealth of R6-billion, his rise into the inner circle of big business helped blur the lines between union officials and mine bosses, creating an ethic of collaboration in the NUM which led its officials increasingly into conflict with their own membership. Ramaphosa's empowerment included a seat on the board of Lonmin, the third largest platinum miner in the world where he remained until early this year, when he resigned to concentrate on being deputy chairperson of the ANC.

Mining is a notoriously exploitative business, but Lonmin had an especially poisonous heritage even before the Marikana massacre. A conservative British prime minister, Edward Heath, described Lonmin's ancestor Lonrho (London Rhodesia) as 'the unacceptable face of capitalism'. Ian Farmer, the chief executive officer of Lonmin at the time of the massacre, earned R13.8-million last year - making the mineworkers' demand for R12,500 look very reasonable.

New evidence from the commission has begun to reveal that the massacre arose from the collusion of state with mining capital to restore production in the face of the miners' challenge to inequality. Nowhere is this clearer than in Ramaphosa's email, but it is also confirmed by a recording (released by the commission) where a police representative promises a Lonmin representative that 'there will be blood tomorrow' [the 16th] if the miners do not surrender. Ramaphosa's email, sent at 2:58pm on 15 August, the day before the massacre, to five other Lonmin executives, called last year's strike at Lonmin 'not a labour dispute but a criminal act' - a characterisation which made

the use of live ammunition against strikers seem justified.

At this lecture, a bigger delegation greeted Ramaphosa with hisses and howls when he came on stage. Later we were harassed for wordlessly holding up our papers. Ramaphosa, like Manuel before him, dodged answering any questions about Marikana, but our intervention on both occasions shifted the terms of the debate, both in the media and for those attending the event who had expected merely to listen. The apartheid government was dismantled largely because the majority of black people - sometimes led by the ANC - refused to obey unjust racist laws. While the ANC fought apartheid, many leaders of the party have changed. Now we have to place hope in other formations and in ordinary working-class people who stage protests and strikes. The power of Lonmin workers, when they withdrew their labour, posed

such a threat to the status quo that the mine officials were moved to conspire with police to 'kill this thing' - the workers' strike.

All those who wield power in elite economic and political positions must be held accountable by the masses. At some point one has to choose whose side to be on - the side of the working class and their families or the state, capital and police who contributed to the killing of 34 people in a couple of minutes without an apology. It often takes only a small group of people to begin to disrupt the status quo. When we do not disrupt the 'normal' functioning of an unjust society, we risk becoming part to injustices such as the Marikana Massacre. **LB**

*Claire Ceruti and Luke Sinwell are researchers attached to the South African Research Chair in Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. They write in their personal capacities.*



*NPC chairperson, Trevor Manuel.*