

# Impala Platinum strike

## Lessons and implications

The Impala strike raises a number of issues on trade union organising and threatens the future of large unions. What led to this violent strike and what are its likely consequences?

**Crispen Chinguno** investigates.

In February 2012 Impala Platinum mine in Rustenburg was plagued by an unprecedented strike marked by violence and intimidation. The strike ended after a six-week trail of destruction. At least three workers were killed; 50 severely injured; 100 charged with public violence; and 55 foreign shop owners (Somalis, Asians and Chinese) were temporarily displaced after their shops were ransacked by mobs of workers on strike and the public.

The violence and intimidation persisted well after the strike and turned into a fierce battle for domination by two rival unions. This culminated in the dislodgment of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) at Impala by the little known Association of Mining and Construction Union (Amcu).

When the strike started, NUM claimed a membership of over 70% of the 30,000 workforce. However, two months after the strike, Amcu allegedly gained over 15,000 members from NUM which suffered massive defections. Amcu subsequently demanded recognition. The employer responded by engaging an independent expert to verify the majority union.

What lessons can we draw from this strike?

### STRIKE TRIGGER

The strike started as an ordinary labour market issue. Management claimed it was losing an average of 25% of miners with a blasting certificate per year because of a reward system that was out of sync with the market. To address the high turnover, it claimed to have consulted NUM and resolved to award miners an 18% retention allowance which was not extended to the other grades. It claimed that other grades remunerations were in line with market rates. The union initially did not raise any objections.

Impala has 14 operational shafts around Rustenburg. On 17 January rock drill operators (RDOs) at shaft number 14 gathered in the morning just before descending. This started as an informal discussion and disgruntlement about the retention allowance awarded to miners and the poor conditions of work. This raised tensions.

They resolved to confront the shaft manager instantly demanding to be paid the retention allowance. The shaft manager requested time to consult his superiors and referred the RDOs to NUM, the only recognised union. However, the RDOs were clear that the NUM should not be involved. Ironically, the two chairpersons of the NUM Impala

branches received the retention allowance as their grade is in the same category as the miners.

The manager requested three days to give feedback and suggested he do this to representatives rather than address them as a group.

In the meantime, the workers viewed this as a breakthrough. They contacted other RDOs at all the shafts celebrating that 'it was working for them at 14 shaft' and advised them to follow suit. Within days the action culminated in a full strike by RDOs at all shafts that had halted production.

They downed tools because they felt deprived especially compared to other mines. An RDO explained: 'I get R3,000 per month whilst some small mines pay up to R9,000 for same job. This is unacceptable... Why is Impala paying so little and yet is big...'

The employer responded by getting an interdict to fire all RDOs on strike and evicted them from hostels. It went on a recruitment drive for new RDOs and re-hired some of those dismissed.

In the meantime, the RDOs realised the significance of drawing in other workers. They used both persuasion, drawing from the company rhetoric 'one team one vision,' and coercion to

bring them to their side. By the end of the first week in February all other workers had joined the strike partly in solidarity and partly due to intimidation. Management hoped that NUM would manage the situation and continued to negotiate with them.

### ERUPTION OF VIOLENCE

The strike was characterised by many forms of violence some of which had been used in the past. Most violence targeted strike breakers. They were usually attacked in the early hours of the morning when the first shift was scheduled to start.

It was apparently coordinated by an underground violence committee and its networks linked the non-aligned interim worker representative committees selected by workers. The violence committee allegedly deployed its members at different points leading to work stations to confront anyone suspected of reporting for duty. Violence was used as a strategy to forge worker solidarity.

In the first fatal incident, the victim was caught in the early hours of the morning and stripped naked before being fatally assaulted and left for dead. Many such incidents followed as the violence escalated.

At the height of the strike video footage of captured men and women scabs who were forced to strip and toy-toy nude was circulated via mobile phones. Images also appeared in the media including a local community newspaper. The authenticity of this clip was later disputed. However, some workers who viewed the footage were traumatised. Women argued that this was targeted to frighten women.

### AMCU AND FIVE MADODAS

Amcu was formed in 1998 by activists who defected from NUM Mpumalanga province after a dispute with national leadership. It claims to be apolitical, non-communist and not inclined to any political party.



*Entrance to Impala Shaft number 6 which was severely hit by the strike and where Amcu members work.*

Kally Forrest

It accused NUM of being too political, neglecting shop-floor issues and conniving with management to short change workers. Its focus is improving conditions of its members. It is not clear when Amcu entered the arena but it moved in quickly soon after the strike commenced.

The Amcu branch representatives are popularly referred to as 'five madodas' irrespective of gender. Before Amcu emerged at Impala, workers set up interim committees of five representatives at each shaft and for the overall two central branches soon after the strike. These were elected through popular vote at mass meetings. After the strike ended they transformed into Amcu structures and assumed the name five madodas.

This concept of five madodas is not new as it was adopted by workers defecting from NUM during the 1997 Amplats strike. This suggests workers' responses are shaped by past struggles. In difficult times workers organise around representatives they believe have the wisdom and strength. Thus the five madodas are viewed as strong, brave, independent, not corruptible and dependable.

### AFTERMATH

According to workers NUM is alienated from workers' day-to-

day struggles though it remains relevant on broader national issues. According to a worker 'it has become a sophisticated workers' organisation at the top and yet its membership is not that sophisticated'. Thus Amcu emerged to close this gap.

After the strike Amcu consolidated its position and simultaneously NUM attempted to retain its position. The NUM northern branch at number 6 hostel called for a report-back meeting after the strike. This was aborted after some workers brutally attacked union officials and some were seriously injured and admitted to hospital. The workers accused NUM of 'selling out' and hijacking a struggle they never initiated. NUM suspended meetings of its structures citing violence.

The violence and intimidation paralysed all structures of NUM at Impala. It became impossible for it to hold meetings. However, its offices remained operational. The interim committees however transformed after the strike into Amcu structures and more workers signed up to Amcu. To promote its identity and presence on the ground, Amcu distributed T-shirts with slogans: 'Amcu will make the difference' and 'Amcu revolutionise the workplace and unite to lead'.

Violence and intimidation persisted. Some workers claimed this was linked to Amcu. They argued that whenever it holds feedback meetings it expects everyone to be there, and everything else to be at a standstill. All shops within the vicinity have to be closed and public taxis suspended. It became dangerous to be associated with NUM whether at the hostels, informal settlement or workplace.

It became even more dangerous underground. Anyone associated with NUM is viewed as an impimpi (informer). Those associated with NUM within work teams are sidelined.

Amcu held a mass meeting which resolved to shut down all NUM offices and hand over keys to management because they claimed it no longer had any membership. The following day all NUM branch and shaft offices were closed down and staff evicted in military style by Amcu. They forcibly confiscated office keys from NUM officials and took over some offices and assumed some duties reserved for the union, such as allocation of hostel accommodation and grievance handling at the hostels.

NUM contested the evictions arguing it was the only recognised union. Management returned the keys to them and NUM branch officials resumed duty. However, on the same day, the southern branch number 8 hostel was attacked by armed Amcu officials without provocation. The NUM health and safety representative was shot in the abdomen and admitted to hospital.

Amcu accelerated its campaign and claimed over 10,000 members within two weeks and demanded recognition. Management decided to verify which of the two unions was the majority using an independent expert. However, the verification supposed to be completed within three weeks, became protracted and Amcu threatened a recognition strike.

It is clear that the employer initially supported NUM as the dominant worker organisation and it was reluctant to open up union competition. A single big trade union simplifies labour relations but the danger is it can also be co-opted. The emergence of Amcu was like a tsunami. Management switched sides after realising that the solution may lie with working with the new union.

A worker sceptical of Amcu commented, 'Perhaps the management realised that Amcu as a new broom could sweep even cleaner'. Amcu was accused by more senior workers of using violence as the core of its strategy. However, many of the unskilled workers have confidence in, and are less critical of Amcu though there is no guarantee that it will be different from NUM.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Workers accused NUM of not giving satisfactory expression to their interests and so many abandoned it for Amcu. The emergence of Amcu brings back debates on the role of unions in the post-democratic transition. Amcu, showing business unionism characteristics with a focus only on wages and shop-floor issues, argues that unions have no political role, but must focus on shop-floor issues and improve conditions of work.

NUM and Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) argue that unions must focus on shop-floor issues at the same time as being a movement that promotes and defends democracy and the hard won gains of workers in line with the idea of social movement unionism.

It is clear that Amcu and NUM have distinct ideological inclinations. Whilst it is clear that at Impala Platinum NUM's model of engaging with shop-floor and broader socio-economic and political issues has failed, the Amcu model of business unionism raises eyebrows as it out

of sync with the history of popular trade unionism in South Africa. Some may view it as retarding working-class struggles. The model ignores that union success in shop-floor issues such as collective bargaining is intimately tied to the broader macro-economic and the social context and industrial relations of the country, which is also connected to the broader global political economy.

In the short term, Amcu may gain from intimidation and disgruntled NUM members who may lack class consciousness. But this may not be sustainable if it does not transform and engage broader socio-economic and political issues which directly impact the shop-floor. However, for NUM to retain currency, it has to be relevant and effective in advancing both the shop floor and broader social and political issues.

The South African socio-economic and political order is unsettled and contested. Who is going to write the new social order? The strike may indicate a shift in the dynamics of labour relations in post-apartheid South Africa and may influence its future. It may indicate the decline of single powerful workers' organisations in the mining sector and beyond.

The violence associated with this is connected to the contestation over the post-apartheid social order. The apartheid order threw up strong trade unions, which are covertly hostile to competition and are now being contested.

The shift from hegemonic (dominant) workers' organisations may have an impact beyond industrial relations. It may negatively impact on the stability of the political Alliance (ANC, Cosatu and SA Communist Party) and the support base of the ANC which draws on unions for mobilisation and support. <sup>18</sup>

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