

# Learning to learn:

## linking Marikana with labour history

If one looks at South Africa's labour history, especially the Durban strikes of 1973 and 1974, a lot can be learnt that is useful to understanding events at Marikana. For instance, some similarities can be drawn if one analyses conditions that influenced workers' discontent, writes **Rosalind Morris**.

**T**he Marikana Commission of Inquiry, popularly known as the Farlam Commission, has released more than 8,000 pages of transcripts from hundreds of hours of hearings and has called witnesses, reviewed forensic evidence and visited the sites of Lonmin's operations. But it has yet to make a judgment about the events of 16 August 2012, when 34 miners were shot dead and another 78 injured by police at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine near Rustenburg.

Regardless of the final report on the 'tragic incident,' as the inquiry refers to it, explanation of what happened at Marikana cannot be limited to the matter of the killings. A fuller understanding requires an account of the confrontation itself, the origins of the strike, the demands and strategies for making them by the miners, the conditions whose improvement the strikers sought, and so forth.

Much good work has already been done in this regard, including a book by Peter Alexander and others (which is reviewed in this issue), and another collection by Thanduxolo Jika, et. al, forthcoming in August. In general, the following factors must be taken into account for one to grasp not merely

the strike but the predicament for which it is a symptom: low wages, a bonus system encouraging risky overtime work, the labour brokerage system, high-interest, informal lending practices that indebt miners, a lack of linkage between cost of living and wage increases, appalling living conditions, resentment of the labour aristocracy in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and its use of bureaucratic procedures to protect privilege, ethnic tension, the perception of exorbitant profit rates in the platinum sector, the emergence of alternative and more militant representative structures, including the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu).

Gavin Hartford has recently supplemented this long list of discontents with a powerful analysis that identifies two particularly significant 'drivers' of the crisis in the mining sector and especially the platinum industry. He focuses on the continued centrality and relatively unchanged nature of the migrant labour system, worsened by a 'living out' allowance that has encouraged migrant labourers to maintain two households, one in the shacklands and another in the labour-sending community.

### LABOUR ARISTOCRACY

According to Hartford, this pattern has been associated with the splitting of family solidarities in traditional communities (although this phenomenon was observed at least 50 years ago, and is less new than Hartford implies). Nonetheless, Hartford rightly notes the consequence of indebting migrant labourers, who are often able to sustain two households and two spouses only through borrowing. Along with many others, he emphasises the loss of representativeness in the NUM and an intensifying gap between the rock face on the one hand, and the labour bureaucracy on the other.

The latter problem was well noted by Sakhela Buhlungu some years ago, and is a source of resentment among many mineworkers, who, according to worker surveys conducted by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) are often less opposed to hierarchy per se than to the loss of direct relations between levels of the hierarchy, and the blockage of access to upward mobility that such loss entails. Nor is it a specifically South African phenomenon. Rosa Luxemburg famously denounced labour

aristocracies created through union bureaucratisation and managerial professionalisation in her brilliant treatise on the General Strike in 1913.

But it is not merely a question of NUM representatives appropriating power and perks for themselves or mimicking the conspicuous consumption of the newly enriched black entrepreneurial classes. As is well-known by now, the core participants of the strike at Marikana were rock drill operators (RDOs), typically of Pondo origin. Thanks to miserable educational systems in their home communities, most of them had extremely limited schooling and literacy.

The most important contribution of Hartford's analysis is his insistence on the structural conditions generated by the migrant labour system in the fomenting of worker discontent. The dependency of industrialisation and particularly its mining industry on the maintenance of territorialised enclaves of subsistence or small-scale production, is, of course, an accepted truth of labour history in this country.

Figured in the image of the peasant-proletarian who shuttles between distinct territories – one industrial, the other rural – this spatially differentiated world has been variously understood in the idioms of mixed economy, uneven development, and the co-existence of both formal and real subsumption within a single polity. It remains largely unchanged today.

In this sense, though mining no longer contributes more than 6% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it still determines the social logic of a very significant portion of the nation-space – a fact that is implicitly recognised in the everyday talk of the miners and those in mining communities, who invariably describe mining as the backbone of South Africa's economy, and the real source of value.

A certain 'fetishism' characterises the place that mining holds in the South African imaginary, if by fetishism we mean both an

overestimation of value and an 'ideological' revelation of the economy's truth. For, the seeming overvaluation of mining (at the level of GDP, and even foreign investment earnings) is nonetheless commensurate with the extravagant ratios, according to which one worker in the mining sector can be said to support between ten and 26 people.

Even Hartford's well-observed logic of the double household fails to grasp the enormity of the burden that now falls upon wage-labourers in the mining sector. It was that pressure that found expression at Lonmin in the initially excessive-seeming demands for raises of nearly 300% although settlements generated gains of a mere 22%.

Hartford's recommendations for the remedy of the current crisis includes an overhaul of the migrant labour system, one that entails shorter work cycles that permit miners to return to their homes, a better transport system, and a restoration of the nuclear families that are assumed to be at the heart of traditional structures of authority and persisting forms of non-alienated labour in rural areas.

However, as Keith Breckenridge has more recently argued, despite the attachments of migrant labourers to the nearly rural image of a residual 'commons' in Pondoland and other labour-sending areas, the fantasy of an intact, not-yet-alienated world is extremely distorted. The communities from which miners come are typically desperately poor, internally divided, ravaged by HIV and AIDS, and as beholden to commodity desires as any other part of the modern world.

Hartford admits that the education system in these spaces is either not working or non-existent; hence the low levels of literacy among the RDOs, which entails both their exclusion from upward mobility and their dependency on increasingly remote representatives who, because they are literate, can negotiate the bureaucratic web of contracts and

labour-management relations. Again, it is a failure of education that lies at the root of exclusion.

### ANALYSIS FAILURE

It is therefore notable that the solutions thus far proposed in the wake of the Marikana strikes have failed to propose major transformations in the circumstances of the sending communities, or a significant investment in their educational systems. Only the latter could reduce the vulnerability of migrant labourers to the systems that are now failing while nonetheless super-exploiting them.

To be sure, better wages, better housing, regulated lending, an elimination of labour brokerage, and an overhaul of the representational system by which collective bargaining is structured in the mining sector is imperative. These immediate needs can be satisfied at the level of policy and investment. But to assume that the deeper structural problems confronting South Africa can be addressed through infrastructural and bureaucratic enhancement that retains the conditions informing migrancy misses the crucial lessons of Marikana, and abandons the labour-sending communities not to the violence of proletarianisation but to mere destitution of subalternity.

By subaltern, I mean those who have no access to power, and especially state power: those who cannot make themselves heard by those in power even when they speak, and who are therefore always being 'spoken for' without at the same time receiving full and accountable representation.

Partly, the limited scope of the solutions proffered thus far arises from the fact that analysis tends to commence with the violence of 16 August, rather than the strikes themselves, and has lacked both comparative breadth and historical depth beyond the provision of a contextual structural framework. It goes without saying that the strikes cannot explain the violence.

To begin with, calling the strike illegal paved the way for the use of force. In this sense the Marikana strikes reveal a use of law which itself structured the possibility of violence. For, the essence of the illegality of the strikes was not, initially, their violence, but rather, their timing. Having been declared outside and beyond the law, by virtue of its nonconformity to the schedule of contract negotiations, the strike was met with force.

For many people, the question then to be asked concerns the degree to which Lonmin and NUM were complicit in this exercise of force, and the role that Amcu may have played in escalating expectations and tensions. One of the more common critical gestures made in the immediate aftermath of the 'tragic incident', was depicting similarities between August 2012 and Soweto 1976.

There is indeed need for a comparative analysis, but Soweto 1976 is the wrong comparison, or at least an incomplete one, and it works mainly on an affective level, to attribute innocence to the strikers. However, the student protests were not, in a strict sense, labour protests. For this reason, a more useful comparison would examine the similarities between the strikes of 2012 to those of 1973 and 1974 – not merely because the earlier strikes were specifically addressed to wages, rather than rights, but because a number of structural similarities can be perceived between conditions informing worker discontent.

Crucial among these is intensified income inequality linked to location in a spatially and ethnically differentiated economy, gaps between wages and costs of living, and laws that make strikes 'illegal' and therefore 'legitimate' targets of violent suppression. Looking back to a moment before the emergence of black unionism may help us to grasp what is and is not attributable to the NUM, and also what the limits of tinkering with migrancy may be in the absence of transformations

in the hierarchy between the spaces traversed by migrants, and the improvement of conditions in the home-sending communities themselves.

### DURBAN STRIKES

We can remind ourselves that, in 1973, Indian and black workers, mostly in the manufacturing sector, undertook what was, by then, illegal strike activity. Their primary demand was for increased wages to compensate for high rates of inflation and increased costs of living, especially transportation.

The Durban strikes followed on a work stoppage by drivers of the Public Utility Transport Corporation (Putco), and commenced with simultaneous actions by the workers in the textiles and steel industries. These were followed by strikes by chemical, electrical, rubber and, to a lesser extent, service industry employees. The result of the work stoppages, which affected more than 50,000 workers in Natal alone, was a wage increase that averaged about 25%, although this amounted to only about R2 per worker per week. At that time, the average wage was R8 per week for black unskilled workers, with an estimated poverty datum line for whites of between R77 and R83 per month.

It is perhaps surprising to realise that manufacturing had already displaced mining by the 1960s and became South Africa's largest contributor to the GDP, growing at rates comparable to that of Japan – nearly 6% per annum. This began to collapse in the early 1970s, both in South Africa and globally. Inflation, which had been about 3% during the decade also grew in the 1970s, and reached 10% by 1974. It would reach a startling 18.7% in 1986 – another significant year in the history of strikes in South Africa.

The strikes in Durban occurred just after a period of increasing inflation, soaring costs of living, and the relative demise of the manufacturing sector after a period

of relative growth but before the final designation of a recession in 1976, and the catastrophic events of the Soweto student protests. The material determinants of their emergence seem to correspond rather straightforwardly to the diagrammatic imagination of proletarian strikes put forward in orthodox Left accounts of working-class protest.

Nonetheless, the Durban strikes of 1973 did not remain confined to the urban manufacturing and heavy industry sector of South Africa. When they moved, as they did, to Carletonville, the centre of the gold mining industry at that time (and still seat of a major regional office for the NUM), demands expanded to include not merely absolute wage increases, but a reduction or abolition of race-based pay differentials, better living circumstances, and changes in the migrant labour system itself. Anglo American's response on 11 September 1973 was a police raid, which led to the deaths of 11 miners. The strike ended a day later, with demands unmet, fear of being fired trumping capacities for sustained work stoppage.

As Sam Mhlongo noted early on the gains made in Natal in 1973 were quickly overwhelmed by inflation. They were, in his estimation, but signs of a future capacity for the politicisation of labour. However, for him, the strikes also exhibited the limits of 'proletarian spontaneity'. Their failure, marked in the case of the industrial workers by the reduction of demands to a question of wages, and by the miners in the rapid return to work when confronted by the violence enabled by the alliance of state and capital, was thus also evidence of the need for organisational and pedagogical coordination in the form of 'separate and independent black trade unions'. As we know, this gap was in many ways filled by the emergence of NUM in the subsequent decade.

A year after the Durban strikes, and about the same time as Mhlongo's essay in the *New Left Review*



appeared, Rick Turner would write under the pseudonym of Gerry Maré, (*SALB 15*, August 1974) about the strikes of East London in a manner that showed the rapid transformation of that initially spontaneous movement in Durban. Noting the rapid movement between different factories and sectors, Turner saw in the strikes a sign of deep desperation. He also observed that the demands by workers did not seek an equalisation of pay among them.

Most important for our consideration, he noted the significance of the 'border' areas, which straddled the homelands or 'bantustans' and metropolitan centres for overall wage policy on the part of capital. Manufacturing labourers from these areas were still presumptively (but not actually) participating in subsistence economies, and their wages were much lower than those of workers from the urban areas. In fact, their average wages (at R6.57 per day) were about half of the wages paid to workers in Port Elizabeth (R12.31). In other words, the logic underpinning migrancy was effective not because of the movement of workers, but because of the existence of marginal relatively impoverished spaces, and because of a fantasy of residual subsistence practices.

The strikes of 1974 were significantly longer than those in 1973, indicating both the emergence of an incipient organisational structure, albeit one in which negotiating and liaison committees were often confused, and a sense of growing militant self-consciousness on the part of black workers. Turner linked this lengthening duration to the fact that the strikes were accompanied by more comprehensive ideological statements linking wage issues to structural patterns of race-based capital.

But even in 1974, the emergence of the strike weapon was threatened by the development of a strategy that Turner called 'negotiating by sacking', which had become the 'main way in which South African employers



*Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega recently testified at the Farlam Commission to answer for police conduct at Marikana.*

convey their "final offer" to black workers'. Dismissed workers could re-apply at the new wage rates being offered, or go elsewhere and likely remain unemployed. We have seen this again and again in the Marikana dispute, where the designation of the strike as illegal on grounds of its non-conformity to the contract's calendar legitimated firing, and subsequently, the deployment of force.

The Marikana strikes are signs of a profound change in the balance of power between elements of the state, the unions, and labour in South Africa. They are also the expression of sector-specific shift. For the first time, since mining began, gold mining is not the largest sub-sector of the industry, and no longer claims the

largest portion of the mining labour-force.

Until education and language are included in the problems to be addressed, and until the tragedy of Marikana is grasped as a recurrent and mobile catastrophe arising from the conditions that make migrancy possible and necessary, we can expect more weeping. <sup>16</sup>

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