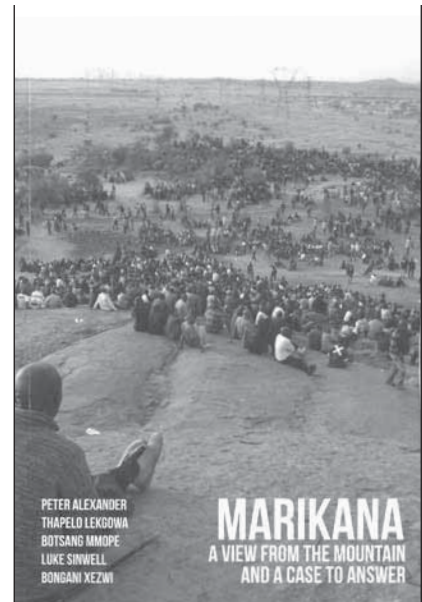


Review

Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer Jacana Press, 2012

Peter Alexander, Thapelo Lekgowa, Botsang Mmope, Luke Sinwell and Bongani Xezwi

Reviewed by Asanda Benya



The book is a voice from below that gives voice to the workers who are often the objects but hardly the subjects. It does not only present them as victims of the massacre but also as workers with agency. While workers' voices is what makes the book, it is because of the boldness of the interviewers - conducting interviews at such a politically charged and emotionally sensitive time - that the book is able to capture one's imagination.

In *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* the workers talk for themselves and about their struggles at work, home and with their labour union. There are clear details about what happened in Marikana prior to the massacre. Convincing, step-by-step and consistent evidence is given by the workers about the events of the fateful 16 August where 34 people, mainly workers, were killed and dozens injured during police confrontations on the hill. The scene is clearly set for those not familiar with the district, Marikana, the reader is oriented around the area and thus able to imagine, locate and contextualise the events that take place.

The empirical evidence is both interesting and compelling. The book first talks about what prompted workers to go on strike. It details their working conditions: the early and often long shifts of

up to 15 hours from as early as 3:30am, the daily arduous task of drilling up to 40 holes, the hot and humid condition they work under, the dangers of unstable rocks and daily possibilities of death as they dig the rock underground, the production pressures to drill and meet monthly targets. They also touch on the different remuneration scales between shafts, the generally low wages and the breakdown in relations between workers and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the failed negotiations between a broad range of stakeholders.

From the reflections of the interviewers it seems workers continue facing hardship even at home where they live in one-room zinc shacks. They also support multiple households with their low wages: in Marikana where they live with their wives/partners and another in their places of origin where their parents and extended families continue to live. Their precarious lives are an underlying theme in the book.

The book offers an important historical record of what really happened on that fateful day. The workers talk about the violence they were subjected to on the day of the massacre, how military vehicles were brought in, tear gas opened on them, how the police 'started putting up a razor fence' thus enclosing and charging at the workers.

The workers make the point that they were not killed because they were fighting but because they were running. 'We were not fighting, we were shot while running and we went through the hole and that is why we were shot. We did not want to be closed in with a wire like we were cows'. While a lot of people thought that workers were carrying weapons from the very beginning, the book shows otherwise. The clear and agreeing evidence emphasises when and why the weapons were brought out by workers and this demystifies the vagueness of mainstream media reports.

What makes the book enlightening is its ability to capture the lives of the workers, holistically, and gives them a human face, unlike popular media reports which branded them as ill-disciplined and making outrageous demands. The timing of the book is another factor that makes it invaluable. It was published a few months after the massacre, demonstrating the depth of the pain caused by the massacre and how much it bothered the psyche of the South African 'public'. More than that, it keeps 'Marikana' in public debates and helps create a somewhat balanced conversation, tilting the scales and challenging some wildly published reports about the massacre.

While the book makes a valuable contribution, there are questions that remain. While the focus is on workers, the book does not explain which workers it is talking about, what kind of employment contracts they have? Were all their respondents full-time workers or not? It would have been interesting to make that distinction and not present the workforce as homogenous or the same.

Platinum has one of the highest levels of sub-contracting in mining. Over one third of the Lonmin workforce according to their annual reports is not hired directly by the mine, but is sub-contracted. The heterogeneity of employment contracts of the workforce has direct implications for wages, working conditions and unionisation which were all at the core of the Marikana strikes and the consequent massacre.

The different pay scales between shafts, as reported in the book, compel the examination of not only labour contracts and relations but also the actual drilling process, the techniques and the mechanisation levels at shafts and analysis of these could have played a role in the different pay scales reported.

The book also posits workers as a united force, with no internal divisions. While the Marikana strike united workers there were also reports that others were 'forced' to join the strikes (mainly women) and others excluded from agreements and negotiations (sub-contracted workers). It would have been interesting if there was a voice from these workers too and their experiences captured.

The focus of the book is on the violence that workers were subjected to, but there is another kind of violence that is downplayed, the structural violence that the working class and the unemployed face daily. The violation they are subjected to in the inhumane and poorly regulated micro-credit system that leaves

them poorer and heavily indebted.

The violation of their human rights especially the right to dignity. How does one maintain dignity when they live in appalling conditions like those in Marikana, where you have to share a lavatory with multiple neighbouring households? The systematic entanglement to the web of poverty is a type of violence they have to negotiate daily.

There is also the violence within that is usually directed at scab labourers and at people who do not want to participate in the strikes. While this type of violence is not a defining feature about Marikana, it is nonetheless important because it is known that intense solidarity usually involves exclusions, how then did the workers deal with scabs?

The issue of scabs brings up another point about gendered victimisation. In the book a woman interviewed remarks about the fear of victimisation by employers if they were to be elected to worker committees, she says 'they were more vulnerable to victimisation by the employer, because there were fewer of them'. One is left wondering whether victimisation by the employer is the only victimisation they were afraid of. From research it would seem that women face more victimisation from their male colleagues than from 'employers' (who are also male in most cases). What is downplayed by her response, is the victimisation that women face daily from their male colleagues underground and on the surface. This talks to violations within and daily negotiated by women. One also wonders if their absence was more than just a matter of victimisation, but also possibly more a matter of women not being seen as legitimate workers underground.

The Marikana massacre was not just a workplace struggle even though it was initially framed

that way, it involved the whole community. Because it was a community struggle we have to engage the community, particularly women in Marikana. Women played a crucial role in sustaining the strike, albeit, from the background, initially, yet the book marginalises their contribution. Even the woman who is interviewed is not asked about her immediate role in the strike, but her role in relation to her husband.

While the book does a wonderful job in giving voice to the workers, the voices of women mineworkers are semi silenced, which leaves one wondering whether at Lonmin or in Marikana there are no women mineworkers. If there are, how come the book continues to exclude them from a conversation about mineworkers? A male worker remarks that 'we were helped by people in the nearby shacks who brought us food'. Who are these 'people' who were cooking for the male workers? It would seem that the strike was not only sustained but was also serviced by women.

Finally, the Marikana massacre exposed the artificial divide between work and home and showed linkages between production and reproduction politics. Embedded and implied in these workplace grievances were crises in households: fathers and mothers who were not able to support their dual families with their wages. Even the interviews in the book reinforce this intertwined and dependent relationship, though not very explicit in the analysis.

While a detailed exploration of some issues would have added to the depth of the book, it remains an invaluable historical text that puts forth the voice of the usually voiceless workers. ■

Asanda Benya is a Phd student in the Department of Sociology and Society Work and Development Institute, University of the Witwatersrand.