

# Strike violence

## Some explanations

Strike violence has continued to rear its ugly head in democratic South Africa. Why has this been the case when there are many ways to deal with industrial relations?

**Crispen Chinguno** explains.

The post-apartheid era promised an industrial relations system that had capacity to manage conflict including strike violence. This follows a history of an industrial relations system characterised by violence during the apartheid regime. This was expected to lose salience following the demise of apartheid. Indeed strike violence declined in the first decade after the democratic transition. However, it increased in the second decade.

Prominent strikes in this period include the 2006 security guards strike which claimed the lives of at least 55 security guards. In 2012 police killed over 34 workers at Marikana in a strike that claimed over 50 lives. Strike violence thus constitutes one of the many forms of violence. Democracy is characterised by freedom of choice and expression and associated with non-violent means of resolving conflicts. How then do we explain or should we understand this type of violence after the democratic breakthrough in 1994?

This article draws from an ethnographic study conducted on the platinum belt between 2010 and 2012 to explain the use of violence in strikes by different stakeholders. The study

is based on the mining industry, given that despite its decline in recent years, it remains central in shaping and explaining the post-apartheid social order common for its poverty, inequality and precariousness.

The definition of violence as a phenomenon is complex and contested. It is often difficult to agree on what it is and what it is not and how to analyse it. The same applies to strike violence. The first challenge is the polysemic nature of strike violence i.e. it evokes various meanings and interpretations. We face a problem of how to conceptualise strike violence and in addition the big question is whose violence matters. Is it the violence by the state (police), workers or employer that matters? In public discussions it is often the violence by one of the stakeholders that takes dominance and yet they are equally significant. Therefore, strike violence needs to be understood in the broad socio-economic and political context.

In this study violence was divided into two broad categories. In the first category is violence which is physical, direct and identifiable and subjective. This relates to the use of force, threat

or actual violence against a person or group and may result in injury, death or physical harm. The second category relates to the social system/structure which harms people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. This form of violence is embedded in institutional practices and associated with social injustice and is referred to as structural / non-physical, invisible or objective violence. These two forms of violence are interdependent. However, this article focuses on physical violence in strike actions. In a strike action workers strategically make use of their collective power. This reflects one of the highest manifestations of industrial conflict. Strike violence represents an escalation of this industrial conflict. There are different genres of strike violence which serve different purposes and the justification may vary. This is disaggregated here on the basis of the stakeholders: state violence (police), worker violence, employer violence and union violence (intra- and inter-union).

### STATE AND STRIKE VIOLENCE

The state, according to Friedrich Engels, constitutes the power arising from society but standing



Red candles for slain mine workers: Marikana Widows hold red candles in memory of the mine workers.

above it to moderate conflicts and maintain order. The state institutes the use of public force and keeps class antagonism in check. The state in a given society may be defined by its monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. However, in South Africa this is contested. In the 2009 Aquarius strike the South African Police Service (SAPS) opened fire on a group of workers and injured at least 10 and two went missing. At Impala Platinum the SAPS opened fire and killed two and injured nine workers on 19 February 2014 during a strike action. The police alleged that the workers were armed and had ignored police orders to retreat and not advance towards Number 6 hostel. This was a group of about 150 workers who were hunting down scabs in the early hours of the morning. The 2012-2013 platinum strike wave saw various forms of state violence. On 16 August 2012 the SAPS killed 34 workers in what became known as the Marikana massacre.

Violence by the state in strikes is often argued to be a means to assert/maintain/restore/control order. However, the state is not always neutral as highlighted in some of the strikes reviewed in this study. During the Lonmin 2012 strike there was concerted

collaboration between the employer and the dominant union to induce the state to use maximum force and violence saying the dispute was not an industrial relations issue but a criminal act in an effort designed to break the strike action. The state's response was thus not an independent reaction to a problem but a result of manipulation by Lonmin, which dictated to the state what was supposed to be done.

In this case there was almost a total subordination of state elite interests to capital interests. Lonmin management, as capitalist elites, manipulated the state to serve their interests. Deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa who then was a Lonmin director represented the capitalist elite and facilitated the connection between the state and elites. Lonmin, through Ramaphosa, dictated to the state the course of action. The state was in this case presented as an instrument of class rule and guarantor of economic accumulation for capital.

### **WORKERS AND STRIKE VIOLENCE**

Workers may resort to violence in strikes for a number of reasons. The most common form of worker violence in most strikes is worker-on-worker violence, which often

targets strike breakers or scabs. In the strike at Aquarius mines in 2009 workers were assaulted by fellow workers usually on the way to or from work. Again, in the 2012 platinum belt strike wave several workers were attacked by fellow workers on the way to and from work and some of them were killed. At Impala Platinum, a worker employed by subcontractor was killed by fellow workers on the way to work just before approaching the bus pick-up point in February 2012. Arson also constituted part of the violence used by the workers. A number of shacks for suspected scabs were burnt down by fellow workers during the 2012 strike wave.

These various forms of worker violence constitute the repertoires of strike violence. This may be explained firstly, as a response to work fragmentation linked to neo-liberal globalisation associated with growing subcontracting/labour broking that undermines worker collective solidarity. Secondly, this may be explained as a response to structural violence in the labour processes. A number of informants highlighted the use of violence as a means of challenging inequality and exploitation perpetrated by capital and the state.

However, workers share competing views on the value of strike violence. Some of the workers view it as empowering and a means of forging collective solidarity. On the other hand, others view it as retrogressive. This reflects the complexity of strike violence. Yet strike violence may also be a means for forging worker collective solidarity and to overcome fragmentation. Violence, thus builds bridges and brings the divided workers together for a common cause. Interviewed workers argued that 'sometimes violence is the only way out to prevent others from taking advantage and report for duty'. Others justified the use of violence by arguing that a strike action has its own moral orders which includes the use of violence to enforce compliance.

A strike action is dependent on a collective decision sanctioned by the majority and its success is anchored in workers' collective solidarity. The scabs thus represent a reverse in worker collective solidarity and undermine the success of the strike action by turning against a collective decision and becoming the instrument of the employer. As a result, the killing of scabs is perceived to be a legitimate punishment to collaborators. Nevertheless, the killing of scabs represents a brother killing brother for the sake of solidarity. A strike has its own rules of conduct which may infringe on the democratic right which embraces the freedom of expression and choice. Workers interviewed argued that violence in strikes is used to enforce and respect the will of the majority. It is used as a rule of the majority.

### UNIONS AND STRIKE VIOLENCE

Union violence in strikes may be intra- or inter-union violence. Intra-union violence is that within the union, whilst inter-union violence cuts across different unions.

Before 2012 the NUM was the dominant union across the platinum belt and almost enjoyed a monopoly. As a result, intra-union violence in strikes was more common than inter-union violence. Intra-union violence was related to internal factionalism which reflected contestation for power and control of the union. For example, in a strike in 2009 NUM branch officials and members of the national executive were attacked by members aligned to a faction. In this attack the NUM vice president lost an eye. In 2012 the NUM Impala Platinum Southern branch was attacked by members at a mass meeting where they were giving feedback to members. The NUM officials shot at marchers during the Lonmin 2012 strike and this marked a turning point.

The emergence of a rival union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu) from 2011 resulted in the escalation of inter-union rivalry which took many forms. At least 13 union officials from either side were assassinated during the 2012-2013 strike wave. At Impala in 2012 union offices were shut down in military style by a rival union faction and at the time it became dangerous to be associated with a particular union. Workers were sidelined in work teams for belonging to the wrong union. This was even more dangerous for the underground work teams. Workers were attacked and labelled *impimpis* (traitors) for having t-shirts of the wrong union. Part of the union rivalry related to trade union competition. For example, during the 2012 strike wave a number of shop stewards crossed floors to the rival union.

### EMPLOYER AND STRIKE VIOLENCE

The violence by the employer in a strike action may take many dimensions. Employers usually hire private security firms to suppress workers' dissent and other

violence specialists. For example, during the 2012 strike wave the private security hired during the strike used special guards from Mozambique and Angola ex-military (Renamo and Unita). The employer's use of violence in strikes is often covert, but often collaborates with the state to suppress workers' discontent.

### QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

In looking at strike violence it is important to address the question of representation of violence and how this is reinforced to justify the use of violence. In the 2012-2013 strike wave the way mineworkers and the violence were represented helps and is important in explaining the responses of the various stakeholders to the use of violence. An analysis of representation is important as some of the representations become dominant. The mineworkers were framed as primitive, illiterate, consulting traditional healers *izangoma* and using traditional medicine *muti*, violent and traditionalist. Their demand for R12,500 was represented as unreasonable and outrageous. They were labelled as financially illiterate. The violence was represented as destructive and damaging to the economy.

It is important to note that representation shapes responses. The representation of the workers as violent, unreasonable, and illiterate justified the use of violence such as the use of live ammunition by the employer and the state. The mineworkers were represented as illiterate, uneducated, traditionalists and this justified the low wages. The workers were represented as unreasonable and illiterate and this in some way silenced dialogue with the workers. The fact that the mineworkers are represented as unreasonable sought to belittle their demands for R12,500.

## CONCLUSION

Violence in strikes remains an important phenomenon post the democratic transition. This violence takes many forms and serves different purposes and the justification may vary. It is argued that strike violence may be a means to assert order and on the other hand a form of resistance to challenge domination. It may also

be a means of forging compliance and worker solidarity. This all highlights its ambivalence. The way stakeholders in strikes are represented shapes responses and reinforces certain practices which may include the use of violence and its justification. Strikes have their own rules of conduct which may include certain forms of violence. <sup>LB</sup>

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