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Mine occupations in South Africa

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Anyone aware of South Africa's history will know that the mining industry was founded upon the extreme exploitation of black workers. It was on the mines that the notorious apartheid pass system had its origins; while the ghettos that became known as townships had their forerunners in the infamous mine compound systems. Even today, racist attitudes permeate through mining institutions. Indeed, the fact that South African mines continue to have some of the worst working conditions and safety records in the world is telling. After all, for the mining bosses it is only insignificant 'others' dying underground.

Of course the mining sector in South Africa merely reflects the attitudes and practices of the broader society. The elite as a whole in the country treat the majority of people with utter disdain or, at best, with condescending paternalism. For bosses and politicians, workers and the poor in South Africa are simply human fodder for the country's mines, factories and electoral machine. Naturally, being subjected to such a dehumanising system has led to a seething anger amongst workers and the poor and rightfully so. It is also this

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anger that often bursts into struggle and direct action — whether in the form of community protests or wildcat strikes.

In mid January, the anger that people are feeling towards the system and the exploiting elite once again erupted: this time in the form of two workplace occupations at the Two Rivers and Bokoni Platinum Mines. On the 20th of January, about 150 workers at these mines began their shifts by embarking on a wildcat strike¹. In a co-ordinated effort they also refused to leave the mines and staged an occupation. The demands of the workers were simple: they wanted their overtime payments, which had not been paid for December, and they wanted a racist manager to be fired².

The workers involved in the action had also undertaken the occupation independently of their unions. As such, the workers actions were based on self-initiative and self organisation. When the bureaucrats from the workers' unions — in the form of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Association of Mineworkers Union (AMCU) — learnt of the occupations, instead of supporting them, they condemned them. In fact, both unions called for the occupations to end immediately and the NUM bureaucracy even went as far as accusing the workers involved in the occupations of kidnapping their members. They also called for the police to intervene and end the occupations³. As it turned out, the NUM members that were supposedly kidnapped were in fact willingly involved in the occupations.

The owners of the two mines — African Rainbow Minerals and Impala Platinum — immediately embarked on an intimidation campaign to try and get the workers to surface. Traditional leaders were called in by the companies to instruct the workers to end the

¹ www.af.reuters.com/article/inestingNews/idAFJJOE60JOBZ20100120 20th January 2010

² www.sowetan.co.za/News/Article.aspx?id=1106390 20th January 2010

³ www.af.reuters.com/article/inestingNews/idAFJJOE60JOBZ20100120 22th January 2010

occupations⁴. When this failed, the two companies obtained court orders to evict the workers⁵. The workers, however, simply ignored the court orders and continued with the occupations.

Nonetheless, on the 22nd of January a large police contingent was sent down the Bokoni Mine with the intention of forcing the workers out. Under the threat of violence, the workers eventually elected to end the occupation⁶. Hearing of their comrades' fate, the workers at Two Rivers Mine also decided to resurface. While the NUM said that they would engage with the workers and management to tackle the reasons why the workers embarked on the occupations, an NUM spokesman also said the union was pleased that the occupations were over and that production would soon be back to normal⁷.

Despite the defeat, the actions of the workers were inspiring and promising – most notably the direct action, self-initiative and self-organisation that accompanied the occupations. What was not inspiring, however, was the actions of the union bureaucrats, who not only abandoned their members, but actively worked against them. Thus, the two occupations once again revealed that workers in South Africa not only face the bosses and politicians as an enemy, but they also often face an enemy in the form of union bureaucrats. As such, if workers are going to emancipate themselves they are not only going to have to struggle against bosses and politicians, but also a union bureaucracy.

Indeed, what is perhaps really needed in South Africa is for workers to reclaim their unions back from a bureaucratic class and

⁴ www.news24.com/Content/SouthAfrica/News/1059/45c260d650164982a987b3b1622e7512/21-01-2010-06-13/Cops_end_Limpopo_mine_sit-in_21st_January_2010

⁵ Lydenburg Mines Refuse to Surface. South African Press Association 21st January 2010

⁶ www.af.reuters.com/article/investingNews/idAFJOE60L07G20100122 22nd January 2010

⁷ www.af.reuters.com/article/investingNews/idAFJOE60L07G20100122 22nd January 2010

to transform them into self-managed, radically democratic, non-hierarchical and decentralised unions. In other words, unions that are controlled from the bottom up by the members themselves and not the bureaucrats. It is in this struggle that anarchists can make a huge contribution with our knowledge of anarcho-syndicalist unionism and ideas of self-management, self-organisation and opposition to hierarchies. Of course, the challenges in trying to transform the existing unions into participatory organizations are immense. It has not been unknown for the unions to send officials from their head offices to intervene in, and in some cases even block, meetings that discuss the need for bottom up participatory unions. Linked to this, some union bureaucrats have resorted to sidelining and even expelling members who raise difficult questions about the growing centralization within unions. Despite this, the struggle to try and bring about self-managed, non-hierarchical, revolutionary and radically democratic unions is vital – whether through transforming existing unions and/or beginning to organize new ones. The reason for this is that without such unions it is going to be difficult for any workplace occupation to succeed or for workers to move towards a truly free society in a process of self-emancipation.