

Cracks in the post apartheid arrangement: Reflections on South Africa's Marikana strike

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for Insight Namibia

The strike at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, South Africa which lasted several weeks and resulted in over 40 deaths will be remembered as a watershed event in South Africa's post apartheid history. It was far more than just a labour dispute and showed the cracks in South Africa's mythical "rainbow nation". The killing of 34 mineworkers by the South African police during the strike was a particularly shocking event that reminded observers of the brutal history experienced during the apartheid era, for example the Sharpeville massacre in 1959 and the brutal oppression of the Soweto uprisings in 1976. The sheer brutality of the police action at Marikana with many workers being shot in the back was both shocking and unacceptable and it remains to be seen what action the South African government will take to ensure that the culprits are brought to book and that such police brutality will never occur again.

The Marikana massacre, however, is not merely a police matter but also raises questions about the country's political leadership and the role of trade unions. Both the ANC government as well as the leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) were out of touch with the striking workers and failed to understand or support their plight. Trade unions are supposed to represent workers' interests at all times and should be controlled by workers through union structures. The principle of workers' control is thus a fundamental precondition for strong, democratic and accountable unions. Marikana has provided a striking example that showed what can happen when unions grow into bureaucratic organisations and their leaders become increasingly removed from their base. Such trends are also emerging within some Namibian trade unions, particularly when unions ventured into ill-defined union investments that enabled union leaders to enter company boards, benefiting from large sitting allowances and often private shareholding – all in the name of workers they were meant to represent.

In addition, power struggles within unions led to splinter unions and intense rivalry between them. This could be seen in Marikana where some unions supported the strike while others did not. In the end, workers formed their own committee to negotiate on their behalf to ensure that demands were addressed.

However, the key factor underlying the Marikana strike is the perpetuation of huge levels of inequality and the absence of social justice. South Africa's mining industry (just like the one in Namibia) has a long history of exploitation and human rights violations as exemplified by the migrant labour system and the infamous "single sex hostels". Even today, many mineworkers are still living in poverty, unable to secure a decent standard of living. The most striking figures in this regard were provided by the Labour Research Service (LRS) in Cape Town. The Lonmin workers demanded N\$ 12 500 per month which the mining companies described as unaffordable. However, South Africa's mining CEOs on average earn N\$ 20,2 million per year, or N\$ 55 000 per

day! The 9 mining companies captured by the LRS database made an average profit of N\$ 39 billion in 2011 alone. These profits would have been enough to pay every person employed in the mining industry in South Africa (including formal and informal workers) over N\$ 88 000. The average wage gap between mining CEOs and mine workers in South Africa currently stands at 390 – 1. In other words, a mine worker has to work 390 years to earn what a CEO takes home in just one year.

Before the Marikana strike, the average minimum wages in South Africa's mining industry stood at about N\$ 4 700 and if they were raised to N\$ 12 500 in line with the demands of the Marikana workers, the wage gap would be lowered to 135 – 1. This would still be very large but it shows that paying a living wage is certainly affordable for mining companies in South Africa – and Namibia. As the LRS concludes, the reason for not meeting the workers' demand is not the affordability of higher wages but rather the greed for continuous high levels of profits. Such greed could also be observed when the Namibian government tried to raise mining taxes last year and was then virtually blackmailed by the mining companies into abandoning the proposal.

The Marikana strike is thus linked to fundamental socio-economic injustices and sends a very loud and clear warning to South Africa and Namibia alike: unless these fundamental injustices and inequalities are systematically redressed, there will always be social tensions and the possibility of violence. The colonial apartheid legacies certainly contributed to the current conflicts but Marikana also sends a clear signal to the new elites in business and politics that the poor have had enough of policies that leave them marginalised. Perhaps the universal lesson to be learned is that people who feel marginalised and exploited will not quietly accept their fate forever.