

'From Apartheid to Marikana': Panel Proposal

'What Happened at Marikana?'

Peter Alexander
University of Johannesburg
palexander@uj.ac.za

The killing of 34 striking workers by the police at the Lonmin Mine at Marikana was the largest massacre of civilians by the South African state since the Soweto Uprising of 1976. There was only one occasion in the country's history when so many strikers were killed, and that was back in 1922. The event marked a turning point. It exposed the existence of an alliance that united the country's most powerful union, its most influential industry and the state against workers challenging material and status inequalities associated with the country's apartheid past. While it revealed the terminal point in the ANC's willingness to act in the interests of the people, it also showed the continuing capacity of workers to challenge injustice. The paper builds on earlier research undertaken by the author and his colleagues which led to the book 'Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer.' While the book was based on interviews with strikers present at the massacre, and thus offered a limited, if valuable, perspective of what happened, the new research draws on evidence presented to the Marikana Commission of Inquiry appointed by the President of South Africa, and therefore provides a more holistic account. The analysis highlights the clash of cultures that existed between the police and the protesters, and the difference of vision that separated the pro-ANC National Union of Mineworkers from the pro-striker Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union. It concludes by arguing that the labour regime, through which class antagonisms have been managed, has begun to unravel, adding to social instability and posing, for many people, the need to develop a political alternative to the governing party.

'The structural causes of Marikana: Inflexible economics, the changing socio-economic conditions of labour migrancy and the special roles of the rock drill operators and the trade unions.'

Paul Stewart, University of the Witwatersrand
Gavin Hartford, Executive Director, The ESOP Shop
paul.stewart@wits.ac.za
gavin@esopshop.co.za

This paper examines the structural causes and events behind Marikana. It starts by showing how the fixed-cost economic constraints of platinum mining places enormous pressure on the sector's single core area of competitive advantage. This advantage lies in enhancing the organisation of the underground production process by maximising the advance per blast and the number of blasts in any shift cycle. Those performing this crucial productive role have historically been migrant workers, with the rock drill operators (RDOs) playing the central role. The living conditions of this migrant labour force have undergone significant change. To break the single sex hostel system, negotiated living out allowances fuelled the emergence of informal settlements. This led to significant additional costs of social reproduction for workers increasingly caught up in local household, loan shark and retail store debt as evidenced by increasing numbers of garnishee orders. Often managing a dual family structure, falling remittances point to fewer return visits to the rural areas and the accelerated collapse of the rural family. Within these changed socio-economic conditions, at work the RDOs had long established themselves as an elite occupational group, historically given preferential treatment by mining companies. The post-democracy establishment of a sophisticated industrial relations system temporarily eclipsed the traditional social power and status of the RDOs. Indeed this sophisticated new industrial relations dispensation fuelled the deep alienation of the RDO's towards both their companies and their unions. Ultimately the socio-economic conditions

and deep distrust for established institutions propelled the migrants into industrial action when the RDOs were overlooked in a unilateral wage adjustment. Negotiating outside the established institutional arrangements, mines concerned to retain scarce skills had agreed with the established trade unions to pay increases for miners, but excluded the RDOs and other workers. Against the background of exclusively RDO strikes at Anglo Platinum in 1999 and 2004, in February 2012 the Implats RDOs led workers out on strike as did the Lonmin RDOs at Marikana in August. This series of factors and chain of events, the paper argues, provide the basis of any social explanation of the causes behind what happened at Marikana.

'Marikana and the MEC'

Sam Ashman
University of Johannesburg
pdf5@uj.ac.za

The Marikana massacre of 16th August 2012, and the strike wave of which it was part, starkly revealed the key economic and social issues in South Africa today. It highlighted how many features of the apartheid system have not so much been preserved, as actively reproduced. In particular Marikana reveals the nature of South Africa's extractive economy, highlighted by the notion of the Minerals-Energy Complex (MEC), and how the century old migrant labour system continues to sustain the MEC, despite nearly two decades of reform of the apartheid labour market system. Marikana also exposed the lack of adequate and coordinated planning of the development of a large and important part of South Africa; the platinum belt. The platinum industry itself exhibits the central features of South Africa's political economy – monopolistic industry structures, tight corporate control and the co-option of emerging black capitalist interests. Platinum extraction also reflects the continuing emphasis of post-apartheid economy on exporting minerals over local beneficiation, the diversification of the economy, and greater employment generation. In addition, Marikana also shone the spotlight on the informal financial sector and growing levels of unsecured debt amongst mineworkers. In sum, Marikana reflects the economic and social failings of post-apartheid development for the majority, the continuing power and determining role of the MEC and white monopoly capital, as well as the virtually unconditional support given to it by the ANC and its newly enriched black elite.