

‘From Apartheid to Marikana’: Panel Proposal

‘What Happened at Marikana?’

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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.