

## Marikana exposes the limits of the new Afro-enthusiasm

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As a Malawian, the 16 August **Marikana Mine massacre** in South Africa invokes the kinds of questions that Malawians asked on **20 July in 2011**. Why did the police shoot to kill demonstrators? Was there absolutely no non-violent action the police could have taken, other than killing so many protesters? Were the demonstrators so violent that the police had no option but to shoot to kill? On both 20 July 2011 in Malawi and 16 August 2012 in South Africa, blame has been apportioned on both sides, revealing the ideological worldviews that we use to interpret ghastly events like these. Around the world on 16 August, people's memories went back to 21 March, 1960. On that day South African police shot and killed 69 demonstrators. As with Sharpeville, one version of events said the police had shot at peaceful, unarmed people, while another version described the demonstrators as armed and having threatened police.



Striking miners gather to protest against Lonmin  
Photo:Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters

President Jacob Zuma cut short a trip to a SADC summit in Mozambique, and urged an end to the finger pointing to let South Africans mourn and allow a commission of inquiry to investigate what really happened. At the risk of making an unfair contrast in dissimilar contexts, Malawi's president at the time, the late Bingu wa Mutharika, blamed 20 July 2011 on the protesters and the civil society activists who organised the protests, and there was no official mourning period announced. The contrast is unfair and the contexts dissimilar because the Marikana massacre arose from an industrial dispute pitting two unions against each other, backed by different interests. In Malawi, the dispute was between civil society and the president himself.

But the loss of life in both cases is shocking. And both situations have their roots in economic grievances emerging at a time when the global mainstream media is changing its characterisation of the African continent. Both scenarios warrant questions about the place on *uMunthu* or *uBuntu* in the social imaginary of Southern Africa. As a peace imperative, the quest for *uMunthu* challenges the propensity for violence and the underdevelopment of nonviolent practices.

Despite calls from President Jacob Zuma and others for parties to desist from blaming each other, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the largest affiliate of the Congress for South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is blaming the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). NUM says the AMCU harbours what it calls "criminal elements" and that the

protests have not been based on genuine industrial concerns. For its part, the South African Communist Party is rejecting any characterisation of the differences between the two unions as “union rivalry”, calling it an attempt to disorganise the South African labour movement.

But the most persuasive analyses of Marikana thus far have come from commentators talking about the political economy of South African violence and the neoliberal context of the mining industry in that country. **Sahra Ryklief**, Secretary General of the International Federation of Workers’ Education Associations, finds no justification for the police using lethal violence. She writes that the police have access to non-lethal weapons such as rubber bullets, tear gas, and tasers. She says the police can cordon off protesters using barbed wire, and they have resources and expertise to prevent crowds from getting violent and harming others. She cites examples of cases elsewhere in the world where police have defused volatile situations without any fatalities.

Ryklief says the blame rests on many parties involved in the broader outlook of labour relations in South Africa. She includes herself on the list of those who bear blame, as a labour organiser and educator. She says that she has previously glossed over and excused coercive actions and violent tactics that workers have used against each other, while urging unity and solidarity. “I will do so no longer,” she declares. She says worker unity now “has to be based on something superior to violent coercion”. She writes that unity based on coercion cannot lead to any lasting, positive solutions. Coercion, she says, has for far too long shaped the way South Africans approach strike organisation. “As labour, we need to take responsibility for change in this respect.”

**Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu** has added his voice to the calls for inward reflection for everyone. He decries the gross inequality and yawning gap between rich and poor, but he also asks marginalised South Africans to reflect on their actions. “When we march, we demand, we destroy and we loot. We care not whether our demands are reasonable, or what actions we take.”

**Gavin Capps** of the University of Cape Town told Amy Goodman on **Democracy Now**, an American TV programme, that the massacre needs to be looked at from the perspective of the recent global rise of demand for platinum. He says this new demand started in the mid-1990s, and its steep ascent has caused many social problems for the people living in the areas surrounding the mines. There has been environmental damage, expropriation of land, displacement of people, and economic exploitation on massive proportions. These are the root causes of what has culminated in this massacre.

According to a statement issued by the Central Committee of the **South African Communist Party**, “all the major platinum mining corporations have made billions of rands out of the world’s richest platinum deposits in the Bojanala District of the North West province, while leaving a trail of misery, death, poverty, illness, and environmental pollution in the surrounding communities.” The Communist Party’s statement is quoting a 167-page report, titled “**Communities in the Platinum Minefields**”, released just days before the massacre.

Gavin Capps says South Africa accounts for 70 percent of global platinum production, yet the mineworkers live in desperate conditions with neither water nor electricity. The disregard for the living conditions of the mineworkers has been epitomised by the manner in which Lonmin, the company that owns the mine, treated the aftermath of the massacre. While the rest of the world expressed shock and disbelief at the massive loss of life, and mineworkers grieved over the loss of their colleagues, the company issued an ultimatum for the other mineworkers to immediately return to work, or face dismissal. Only the intervention of the South African Council of Churches and the office of President Jacob Zuma restrained the company from dismissing over 70 percent of mineworkers who defied the ultimatum.

In the words of the **Socialist Party of Azania**, “profit is always put before the interests of people and never vice versa.” Activists working for social and economic justice have for a long time bemoaned neoliberal economics and how it puts profits over people’s wellbeing. The current rhetoric rebranding much of Africa as the new hub for the next global economic miracle risks



burying the inconvenient questions that dog neoliberal economic thinking. Gone are the days when development meant equitable growth across an entire country or region.

Most economic development happening across Africa today is concentrated in narrow straits and benefits very few people at the expense of the rest. In South Africa, the development of ultra-modern cities within cities such as Sandton in Johannesburg best exemplifies this. Sandton can stand toe to toe with Manhattan or any highly advanced city in the world. Yet just on the outskirts of Johannesburg, there are increasing numbers of people living in shanty towns with no water and no electricity. In the words of **former Archbishop Desmond Tutu**, “We are a deeply wounded people who are custodians of a very special country with people and resources that are second to none. There is enough for all South Africans to share.” The same trend is happening in Malawi, where the capital city, Lilongwe, has currently no less than four shopping malls under construction. Yet just a few miles within the same city, hundreds of people live in slum-like conditions. This is the trend across much of Africa and the developing world.

For South Africa and the wider region, the massacre at Marikana ought to usher in a new era of critical reflection on the trajectory of Africa’s economies amid the renewed rhetoric of latter day optimism. The optimism is well-intended and holds transformative potential for how Southern Africans look at themselves and shape their destiny. While it exposes the naked greed of capital in a neoliberal era, the optimism also risks masking deep grievances particularly by those being left behind. Tutu’s words are true for much of the continent and beyond: “Our ‘haves’ have largely failed to share, our ‘have-nots’ are feeling increasingly frustrated, and our leaders are locked in seemingly endless contestation for political and economic power.” Marikana should force African countries to rethink their role and place in the global economic structure, and to persist in questioning the kind of inequality the world is experiencing.

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August 29th, 2012 | [Economics](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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