The Spirit of Marikana

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The Rise of Insurgent Trade Unionism in South Africa

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Introduction

Mgcineni 'Mambush' Noki, who became known as 'the man in the green blanket', is an iconic figure of the contemporary South African strike wave at the three international platinum mining giants – Amplats, Impala and Lonmin.[1] After being attacked on 11 August 2012 by members of the then dominant union at Lonmin mine, Mambush and others armed themselves with traditional weapons and fled to the now infamous mountain at Marikana to wait for their employer to address them about their wage demand of R12,500 per month. (This was equivalent to about $500 at the time.[2]) Mambush's family later recalled that he always made peace at his rural village in the Eastern Cape whenever there was a quarrel, but now he had been pushed into an all-out war. A rock drill operator (RDO) with a penetrating voice and a wide frame, he was selected to be on the militant, and at the same time defensive, worker committee. When the workers in Marikana effectively removed negotiations from the offices to the mountain, Mambush acted as their spokesperson.

Embodying the uncompromising characteristics of a warrior, he became a hero practically overnight. Yet almost as quickly as he became a recognised leader, he was targeted by police, who shot 14 bullets into his body. I could not interview him or tell his story comprehensively.[3] Fortunately, however, Mambush was just one among many in the platinum belt. He represented the unflinching determination of mineworkers to engage with management not only for themselves and their families, but for future generations of exploited and oppressed people across the world.

The case study which this book showcases is a testimony to what scholar-activist Frances Fox Piven has tirelessly demonstrated in her eminent work: that when ordinary people organise collectively, outside of

the framework of elites and mainstream political authorities, progressive changes in the structures of society become possible.[4] Drawing primarily from original interviews with the individuals who led the strikes at Amplats and Lonmin, this book details how mineworkers united with each other, and in some cases died, while fighting for basic dignity. It illuminates the micro-processes through which the idea of a 'living wage' of R12,500 and then R16,070 first emerged from conversations between two sets of workers in changing rooms at each mine, and then spread like wildfire across the industry. It soon shook an entire nation. Mineworkers, through their ad hoc independent worker committees, challenged what they considered to be the 'pocket unionism' exemplified by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), bringing a new radical political culture to the mines – one based on worker needs rather than bosses' interests, and informed by notions of direct democracy.[5]

At Amplats and Lonmin in particular, worker committees galvanised an innovative conceptualisation and expression of power. If the culture and forms of power that they exhibited were not qualitatively new, they were far more strident than anything that had been witnessed in the recent past. When we comprehend more completely what transpired during and ahead of the 2012 unprotected strikes at Amplats and Lonmin, it becomes apparent how and why the first half of 2014, under the banner of the upstart Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), witnessed the longest strike in South African mining history. Yet despite the overwhelming significance of worker committees, they have been given very limited scholarly attention.

Since the burgeoning of trade unions internationally from the mid to late 1900s until the present, they have been the preferred topic of scholarly work by labour historians.[6] Industrial sociology in post-apartheid South Africa has also been dominated by investigations into formalised unions which operate within the framework of the tripartite alliance.[7] Sakhela Buhlungu in particular has noted the anti-democratic nature of unions, the tendency for shop stewards to drift away from workers and become part of the bureaucracy, rather than to represent them, as well as the discontent that has resulted from this. He has also called the victory of 1994 – in which the federated Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) gained great influence as a partner with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) – *A Paradox of Victory*.[8] COSATU and its affiliated unions were largely institutionalised by capital

and its allies in the 'class compromise' which resulted from the transition to democracy. COSATU had major achievements after its establishment in 1985, and played a key role in formulating the people-centred Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) – only to see it jettisoned in the name of market principles and international investors under the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy document of 1996.

The NUM, which once courageously backed the blacks oppressed in the struggle for liberation from white apartheid rule,[9] became a pocket union. Its former general secretaries, political heavyweights including former deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe, general secretary of the ANC Gwede Mantashe and deputy-president of the ANC Cyril Ramaphosa, a billionaire who sat on the board of directors at Lonmin at the time of the Marikana massacre, lambasted rather than defended the strikes of 2012 and 2014. The NUM's close ties to big business and the ruling party, and primarily its failure to respond to the concerns of ordinary workers at the local branch level, became its Achilles heel. The union is now virtually defunct in the platinum belt, with one leader in a play on words calling it the 'National Union of Management'.

The tendency of social scientists to focus on formalised structures in the workplace and elsewhere has meant that they pay little attention to 'informal' worker organisations – in this case worker committees. Independent worker committees are arguably the most neglected features surrounding the Marikana massacre, an event that is likely to become as important symbolically as the Soweto uprisings and the Sharpeville massacre, as a turning point in South African history. According to Philip Frankel, author of the authoritative text on the Sharpeville massacre, 'Marikana has [already] become a moral barometer against which future developments in mining and wider South Africa will be measured for many years to come.'[10]

Worker committees are fundamental for understanding the strike wave along the Rustenburg platinum belt, where these independent organisations at one time asserted an overwhelming degree of power. Only empirical research can uncover the hidden details which shed light on the nature of these committees and their political trajectory. At this stage, scholars and the general public know very little about them or their relationship to unions. The Marikana Commission of Inquiry, initiated to unpack the causes of the events between 9 and 16 August

2012 in Marikana, also proved inadequate to explain the role of these committees, in part because of the limited period within which it sought to understand and explain the strike and the immediate events surrounding the massacre itself.

The formation of independent worker committees, and the strikes they helped organise and sustain between 2012 and 2014, were by no means isolated events. They are a reflection of ongoing contestation over union representation at the platinum mines which dates back at least to the early 1990s. Moreover, the NUM's services to its members in the Rustenburg region had consistently been rated by researchers as among the worst in the country.[11]

Inequalities between the rich and the poor, unemployment and poverty did not end in 1994, but arguably became more deep-seated than they had been under the apartheid government.[12] Subsequent to the democratic transition in the 1990s, which saw unions like the NUM incorporated into the tripartite alliance, employer and employee relations tended to be characterised by the idea of corporate or 'pocket' trade unionism. The disempowerment of the NUM during the period following the transition to democracy paralleled what scholars and commentators have called 'the death of labour and class-based movements'.[13]

However, these movements were soon revived on an international level. With the deepening crisis of capitalism epitomised by the world economic crisis from 2008, something had to change. In response to the crunch of the drained economy and the increasingly precarious nature of working-class jobs, labour discontent began to spread. Beverly Silver, who has undertaken extensive investigations into the relationship between the shifts in globalisation and worker's movements since the late 19th century, noted that in 2010, 'the world's major newspapers were suddenly filled with reports of labour unrest around the world'.[14] This was followed by unprecedented protests against austerity internationally, and mass uprisings in Egypt against authoritarian rule. By 2011 the so-called 'Arab spring' seemed to offer hope that ordinary people could transform politics, society and labour relations through mass action. Later that year, the Occupy movement took hold in the United States, and in the state of Wisconsin, public sector workers organised en masse to demand that the bargaining rights of unions be re-established.[15]

New forms of workers' power were beginning to take shape during this period, as we witnessed the unravelling of the trade unions founded

on the events of the Durban strikes of 1973 and the emergence of black trade unions throughout the 1980s. As a response to the events surrounding the Marikana massacre, South Africa found itself at a crossroads of trade unionism. In the Western Cape, farm workers initiated unprecedented unprotected strikes in 2012 to demand higher wages. AMCU soon became the most obvious example of the rupture inside the trade union movement, dethroning NUM in the platinum belt and creating circumstances that led to the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) emerging as the largest trade union in the country.

In South Africa, the creation of independent committees in the platinum belt was a worker response to the shifting nature of the political economy both nationally and internationally. The prices of platinum, and commodities generally, boomed in the 1990s, but the gains went to shareholders – many of whom are overseas – and not to workers. This left mineworkers overstretched. They were digging out platinum from underground, working overtime, while their wages remained largely untouched.

In the lead-up to the 2012 strike wave, mining companies themselves exhibited some of the most profound inequalities between employees and chief executive officers (CEOs), leading one political economist to aptly describe the insurgency in the Rustenburg platinum belt as a 'local battle in a global wealth war'.[16] Economists at Labour Research Services (LRS) conducted a survey on mining company CEO salaries in 2011, which found that the average CEO made R20.2 million per year, or R55,000 per day. This made the worker demand for R12,500 per month seem like a pittance. In 2011 the 'wage gap between the CEO and the average worker in the mining industry was 390 to 1'.[17]

Inequality and tough working and living conditions are not in themselves an adequate explanation for a revolt by mineworkers. In fact, another set of more immediate structural issues played a critical role in harvesting the workers' insurgency. In the two mines under consideration, the work process involved conventional rather than mechanised mining. This means that the mines required drillers (and other categories of worker) to create the conditions for the removal of the platinum, and gave workers including RDOs more power in the workplace.[18] Unlike the gold and coal industries, managers at the platinum mines had also

developed a tendency, going back to the 1990s, of engaging directly with worker committees over wage demands.[19]

In 2011, for example, in an attempt to prevent the emergence of further unprotected strikes, Lonmin initiated a policy whereby management could engage directly with workers outside of the formal bargaining structures (see Chapter 2). By engaging directly with them, management suggested to workers that they had power independently from their trade unions. These decisions by management backfired, at Lonmin and elsewhere. The following year witnessed the major wave of unprotected strikes in 2012 which largely forms the basis for this book. Workers formed independent committees at Impala in early 2012, and these were very effective at obtaining concessions from the employer. This led workers at Lonmin and Amplats to form worker committees which engaged directly with management and subsequently led unprotected strikes (see Chapters 2 to 4).

In 2012, RDOs were being paid $511 per month (about R5,000). Most were the main wage earners in their families, responsible for up to 15 dependants. When they fell into debt (as many did, not surprisingly), there was extensive use of garnishee orders by debt collection agencies to recover the money owed, which exacerbated their situation. The pay for one of the most arduous and dangerous jobs on the planet was insufficient to say the least, and these 'exploitative debt relations' made things even worse.

It would seem that the structural conditions existed for mass mobilisation. The workers digging out metal in the mineshafts were ready to erupt. But the structural conditions in late 2011 and early 2012 can only partially explain why people embarked on unprotected strikes in exceptional numbers. 'Someone had to blow the whistle,' in the words of one activist. No observer or participant could have predicted the spirit and sheer magnitude with which mineworkers would come out to make their demands over a sustained period of time in both 2012 and 2014.

AN ACTOR-ORIENTED APPROACH

Scholars have argued that the migrant labour system (see prelims) – whereby most workers had homes and families elsewhere in rural areas, and travelled long distances to the platinum belt for work – and the social and economic position of RDOs are (structural) causal factors

requiring attention.[20] These are valuable contributions and provide a crucial starting point from which to understand the platinum belt strike wave. However, considering these factors fails to address the role of locally specific factors and triggers. Existing approaches have fallen short in revealing why the origins of the strikes can be traced back to certain moments in time, and specific shafts of a mine and not others.

Understanding these dynamics requires a sociological examination of mineworkers centrally involved in the strikes. A primary step to piecing together a narrative which helps explain the origins of the strikes is to identify key leaders and to uncover hidden histories. This work lies behind the development of the argument of this book. A great deal of self-organising from below has been underexplored; in effect, it is written out of history. As the prominent historian Philip Bonner has noted in relation to the study of social transformation more generally, 'These bottom up processes are generally subterranean, slow moving, and barely visible, often only exploding after long periods of gestation into public view.'[21]

It is necessary to add here that structures, and indeed institutions and more ephemeral patterns of social relations, are of course part of people's enactment of agency.[22] Agency is not something which merely results from structural factors, however, although agents obviously make history within a specific social and economic context over which they have little control. This book takes as a starting point the 'organic capacity of the working class', or ordinary people in the conscious process of what Marx has described as 'making their own history'. Colin Barker and his colleagues captured the essence of this approach when they indicated that:

> The very social relations of production are themselves the product of ongoing agency, even if in alienating forms, on the part of those who currently suffer their continuation .... There is no absolute line of division between movements seeking 'reforms' within existing structures and movements that threaten to surpass their limits. Rather, movements operate on the boundaries between forms of opposition that remain contained within the limits of the system, and those that potentially transgress them.[23]

Another salient concern which emerged during the course of writing is the tension between individual and collective agency. Without the unity of a collective, the individual is virtually powerless in labour relations, whereas without individuals' motives, energy, experiences, creativity

and dreams – in short, their agency – the collective also cannot exist.[24] The book focuses on individuals and their relationship to the collective in an attempt to uncover the leadership practices of a few key organic intellectuals who played a significant role in the development of the 2012 and 2014 strikes, and perhaps more crucially, in the events immediately prior to them.

As 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense these individuals developed counter-hegemonic ideologies rooted within the material conditions and discourses of their fellow workers. According to the Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, 'all men [sic] are intellectuals'.[25] Of specific interest in the pages that follow are 'articulate knowledge specialists who are found in all sectors of society'.[26] More specifically they can be described as 'framing specialists: women and men who develop, borrow, adapt, and rework interpretive frames that promote collective action and that define collective interests and identities, rights and claims'.[27]

At the core of an organic intellectual's ability to be effective at achieving counter-hegemony, and therefore also unity among the working class, is arguably the notion of 'leadership'. In part because of attempts to avoid 'great man' theories of history, leadership has tended to be neglected in the study of collective mobilisation, and more specifically of social movements.[28] Barker and colleagues point out that:

> Few academics want to revive conservative 'agitator' theories which imply that there would be no strikes, no militant movement activity, were it not for the malign trouble-makers who cause them. We must, it is argued, pay proper attention to the real grievances motivating movements, just as we must avoid treating movement members as nothing but mindless sheep.[29]

Regardless of scholars' emphasis, however, labour and other movements are inextricably intertwined with leadership which conceptualises a common set of demands, unites sympathisers and exerts power in solidarity.

While the dominant perception of the strikes of 2012 and 2014 is that they were spontaneous uprisings which involved employees who used primarily violent techniques and intimidation to maintain solidarity (among other employees or non-strikers), the pages that follow should indicate to the reader that something very different may have been far

more relevant. By this I mean democratic leadership and the element of persuasion. 'Persuasive argument' is, according to Barker, 'inherently "dialogical" in function, it seeks understanding and agreement. It presumes that an initial proposal may be modified by the listener's response. It encourages the further critical self-development of the follower.'[30] While these workers (through their committees) provided the way forward, they were led by (and directly accountable to) the rank and file. Referring to Foucault's conception of 'pastoral leadership', Dunbar Moodie elaborated the way in which NUM stalwarts (including Ramaphosa) applied this form of leadership in the mid-1980s:

> the pastoral leader does not dominate. Instead, he gathers his followers together, guides and leads them. This is fundamentally beneficent power, directing the conduct of its followers, individualising them in a complex mutual relationship of responsibility. For the pastoral leader, wielding power is a duty, pursued with zeal, devotion and endless application, offering care to others but denying it to oneself. Leadership is defined not as an honour but rather as a burden and effort. The leader puts himself out for, acts, works and watches over all his followers.[31]

Paradoxically, the failure of the NUM to apply this method in recent years created the conditions for a new form of organisation of pastoral power to emerge.

Existing accounts of the strike at Lonmin give precedence to Mambush, and imply that he led the workers throughout, yet – as this book shows – he was not one of the RDOs who actually initiated it.[32] While the initial involvement of many mineworkers sprang from the moment, the involvement of a handful of those who became leaders at various points before, during and after the strikes was anything but spontaneous. Without their efforts to engage within (and where necessary create) informal networks for the mobilisation of the strikers, it is not unreasonable to conclude that events would not have occurred at the moment and in the manner in which they did. Without their strategic intervention, events might have shifted onto another track, taking a different course.

Indeed, for socialist activists working closely with the workers in the platinum belt, it appeared that the unprotected strikes of 2012 were the pinnacle of resistance, and that a swift decline in mobilisation was likely to follow as a result of workers' and their leaders' decision to join what

appeared to be a top-down, authoritarian union. AMCU was opposed to the unprotected form of strike that worker committees led and sustained in 2012. It seemed to many observers, myself included, that under the banner of the new union, unprotected strikes were not an option, and worker militancy would soon perish. Such assumptions conform to the current Marxist critique of trade unions as 'managers of discontent', limited by their incorporation into bargaining structures and dependent on management support.[33]

The empirical research provided below indicates, however, that the core politics that underpinned the militant strikes of 2012 have remained constant over time, despite workers' decision to join a union and to engage primarily in protected strikes (hence the 2014 strike which has been stronger and longer). Put in a different way, this study demonstrates that when the rank and file takes on an insurgent character, the trade union's bureaucratic or official power (at the national, regional and branch level) becomes marginal, but only relatively so, as the events reveal. Just as the exclusive nature of the NUM provided the structural basis for new forms of organisation to emerge (that is, worker committees), worker committees created the political space, or at least the possibility, for the flourishing of an insurgent trade union (AMCU).[34] The discourse in which various stakeholders sought to enact their agency had shifted with the introduction of worker committees. The new structural context constrained certain practices and ideas, and enabled others. There had been a narrow arena in which workers reluctantly accepted that they should strike to demand a pay increase of about 10 per cent under the auspices of the NUM. The new politics now created an open space to engage around what workers thought they needed in order to live decently. In other words, instead of being based on what management would likely consider rational, mineworkers based their demands on the amount of money which they considered a living wage. (They settled on R12,500.)

Gramsci's analysis of the emergence of trade unions and their relationship to the mobilisation of rank and file workers is instructive in terms of AMCU's burgeoning following workers' resolve to fight for a 'living wage' in the Rustenburg platinum belt from 2012. He cogently pointed out that 'The trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon: it becomes a determinate institution, that is, it assumes a definite histor-

ical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define[s] it.'[35]

AMCU is the product of the militant labour struggles – in this case the relatively short-lived but extremely potent worker committees – in the platinum mines. Leaders of the worker committees at Amplats, Implats and Lonmin organised independently from unions and embarked on unprotected strikes. When these strikes ended, worker leaders, in dialogue with management, believed they needed a union to represent them. They chose AMCU. The union began to champion the radical wage demand of R12,500, since rank and file workers had died on the mountain in Marikana waiting for their employer to come to negotiate for that amount. Joseph Mathunjwa took the demand of R12,500 and made it his union's pillar. In a sense, AMCU and Mathunjwa's rise to prominence in the platinum belt has been drawn out of the blood of the 34 mineworkers killed during the Marikana massacre. One prominent AMCU T-shirt proudly worn by mineworkers in the platinum belt reads, 'Never Forget: We Died for a Living Wage … The Struggle Continues.'

The analysis presented below indicates that AMCU is neither the saviour nor the enemy of the working class. Rather, the union as an entity in itself is riding on the wave of the insurgent fervour of the rank and file. The fact that the dominant view of both the state and society at large is that unprotected strikes are 'illegal' (or anarchic) leads us to delegitimise any organisation associated with this behaviour. The committees did not need to sign a paper granting them formal collective bargaining rights in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of management (who negotiated directly with leaders of the committees during and after the 2012 strike) or the workers (who put their trust in them to negotiate on their behalf). With the exception of some former members of the committee, most workers did not see a firm break with the politics of the worker committees, but rather viewed AMCU (in particular its face and spokesperson, Mathunjwa) as the embodiment of their struggle.

The concept of insurgent trade unionism assists us in analysing the relationship between the past, when workers went on unprotected strikes with their committee at the helm (2012), and the present, when workers go on protected strikes under the AMCU banner (2014). What we witnessed in 2014 was not an ordinary trade union, but one that came into power following a mass upheaval. The notion of insurgent trade unionism both highlights the diversity of existing trade union ex-