

## Marikana Massacre: A Turning Point in South African History?\*

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### Introduction

On 16 August 2012, the South African police killed 34 strikers employed by Lonmin, a British multinational, at its Marikana mines. Arrests, torture, trauma and hunger followed, but the strike continued and the workers eventually achieved significant gains in pay. Since then, a wave of militant strikes has spread from industry to industry, and this is set to continue. At the same time, South Africa has been downgraded by rating agencies and the value of the Rand has declined substantially. One political scientist captured the position in as follows:

From my own experience, I sense that there is a virtual consensus among overseas opinion-makers (including strategic investors) that our local 'miracle' is scarred beyond redemption under a basically leaderless, corrupt and unreformable government. Events at Marikana made a mockery of our claims to democratic governance, and we remain one of the most unequal countries in the world.<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines the Marikana Massacre by using and developing William Sewell's notion of an 'event'.

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'Historical events should be understood', says Sewell, 'as happenings that transform structures'. For him, 'events constitute what historians call "turning points"'. In order to specify the nature and extent of this transformation it is necessary to investigate the preceding structures. Thus, historians must sometimes break from narrative to, as he puts it, 'analyze ... relationships that define the nature and the potentialities of the objects and persons about which a story may be told.'<sup>2</sup> Here, one can add a significant methodological point. The value of an 'event' to a researcher is that it exposes structures that might otherwise remain unseen, or at least reveals which structures, or aspects of structures, are historically important.<sup>3</sup> In this way, an event provides a link between agency and structure. It is a seismic episode that produces new faults from existing tectonic stress. While historians have the benefit

of knowing what comes next, and, so, confidently identify their turning points, the contemporary writer is unlikely to know if a second, larger quake will follow the first, so must temper their judgments with words of caution.

Sewell makes the further point that 'details matter: contingent, transient, or seemingly trivial particularities of the situation can have major and lasting effects on subsequent history'.<sup>4</sup> In this brief account I start with details about the event, the massacre, that seem important; then move to salient structural considerations; and, finally, offer conclusions related to the theme of the conference. All this is done in a manner that, because of space constraints, is inevitably sketchy.

### The massacre<sup>5</sup>

On Friday 10 August 2012 rock drill operators at Lonmin went on strike for decent pay. That night they were joined by other workers. Their action was not supported by their union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and the next day, 3000 of the workers marched to the offices of NUM in an attempt to secure its backing. To their amazement, some

NUM activists guarding the offices shot at the protesters, badly injuring two of them. Exemplifying the importance of 'seemingly trivial particularities', the strikers believed that these two men had been killed. In fear of further attacks, they retreated to the so-called 'mountain' (actually an igneous mound that South African's call a koppie) and some armed themselves with traditional weapons, including spears and machettes. The day after, the 12<sup>th</sup>, the strikers marched to the NUM office again, this time armed, and although they did not reach their intended destination they killed two security guards in a confrontation along the way. The next day, Monday 13 August, a flying picket of just over a hundred strikers was ambushed by a large contingent of police, who demanded that the workers lay down the weapons. The workers said they would hand these over once they got back to the mountain, but feared they might be attacked by NUM if they gave them in then. At this point the police announced they would count to ten, after which they would shoot at the workers. After the workers began to leave, singing and in tight formation, the police opened fire, killing three men. In the melee two police were hacked to death.<sup>6</sup>

Following failed negotiations, on Thursday 16 August a small army of police attacked the workers as they came down from the mountain. They used barbed wire, rubber bullets, tear gas, stun grenades, water cannon, galloping horses, fast-moving armoured vehicles, helicopters, and, most importantly, sharp ammunition fired by automatic weapons. TV viewers around the world watched the slaughter of some of these men. Twenty workers were killed in a few minutes. However, the media failed to provide the workers' account of what happened and the police's version prevailed. On Monday 20 August I returned to Marikana with two fieldworkers. Interviewing miners we learned that there had been a second site of killings, about three hundred meters from what came to be known as 'Site One'. This was a low koppie that we named the Killing Koppie and the Marikana Inquiry called Site Two. Here workers had been surrounded and 14 were shot dead.<sup>7</sup>

### Culpability

The police killed all 34 of the people who died in the massacre, and no police were injured in the process. The police claim that they acted self-defence. Even if there

were an element of truth in this, it would not, in my view, justify the disproportionate use of force or the permission that was given to shoot at the workers. It certainly does not explain the killings at Site Two, where workers were fleeing from the bloodshed at Site One, nor the fact that many workers were shot in the back and others had multiple bullet wounds. Had the police wanted, they could have dispersed the gathering with few or no fatalities by using rubber bullets, tear gas and water canon fired from the safety of armoured vehicles or helicopters. This is a fairly common approach to public order policing in South Africa. Events could have been filmed and arrests made later. But rather than use public order police, special para-military units were deployed, and it was these that were responsible for the deaths. The decision to use this task force armed with automatic weapons and to mobilize police from around the country was taken at a very high level, and it is highly possible that at least one cabinet member was involved. A judicial inquiry on the massacre has revealed that police tampered with evidence by placing traditional weapons beside dead bodies; that the police has failed to provide video footage of key events; and that a written instruction signed by the national chief of police was doctored, possibly to protect the Minister of Police. In all of this it is worth keeping in mind the words of Ronnie Kasrills, a former post-apartheid Minister of Intelligence:

These people were hardly occupying some strategic point, some vital highway, a key city square. They were not holding hostages. They were not even occupying mining property. Why risk such a manoeuvre other than to drive the strikers back to work at all costs on behalf of the bosses who were anxious to resume profit making operations.<sup>8</sup>

The police operation would not have been necessary if Lonmin had been willing to talk with its workers. The company attempted to deny any responsibility for the massacre by claiming that the conflict was about inter-union rivalry between the established union, NUM, which had majority membership, and the smaller Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). But the strike and the occupation of the mountain united members from both unions. Moreover, the company had only recently agreed a pay increase for RDOs, which it

negotiated with a non-union workers' committee, rather than with NUM (as dictated by collective bargaining procedures), so it had no reason in principle for not negotiating again with the unofficial committee that was leading the new action. The pay increase agreed with RDOs was introduced because Lonmin, the third largest platinum producer, was losing RDOs to its larger neighbours, Angloplats and Impala. But it was worried that if it acceded to the large increase demanded by the August strikers this would undermine its position relative to these competitors. That is, it was inter-company rivalry rather than inter-union rivalry that sparked the tinder leading onto the massacre. In practice, the company provided wide-ranging logistical support to the police, including an operations room and base camp, transport, access to its own intelligence, information from cameras positioned around the mine (there were well over two-hundred of these apparently), back-up from mine security, a helicopter, ambulances and medical support, and a detention centre for arrested strikers.

While NUM was not directly involved in the massacre, unlike Lonmin, its role must be questioned. Many workers we interviewed complained bitterly about the union, which they said was corrupt, a claim justified by other evidence. Leading shop stewards were paid at a level three times that of ordinary workers, and their accompanying perks and life styles distanced them from ordinary workers. It was subsequently revealed that top union leaders receive salaries from the mining companies.<sup>9</sup> Most of the RDOs were members of NUM, but on 10 August local leaders of the union attempted to get workers to break the strike and return to work.<sup>10</sup> They claimed the stoppage was in breach of collective bargaining and was not protected in law, and they saw this as more important than accountability to their members. The next day, when NUM activists fired on strikers, some of those attacked were their own members. On Sunday 12 August, the NUM President spoke with the Minister of Police, demanding that he take tough action against the strikers, and the following day the union's general secretary put out a statement appealing for 'the deployment of the Special Task Force or the South African Defence Force as a matter of urgency.' On 16 August ten of the 34 people killed were members of NUM, but

the union has never condemned the police responsible for this murder.

### Structural considerations

Underlying the dispute is a huge economic and cultural gap between Lonmin and its workforce. For the employers, pay rises could only be justified if they were linked to increased production, or inflation, or staff retention or, perhaps higher profits. The workers we interviewed saw things differently. Some were aware that senior executives could be paid more than two hundred times as much as ordinary workers and that high profits had been invested in new fixed capital, hence increased production, rather than in rewards for those whose labour made this expansion possible. For others, injustice was quite parochial – it was about unequal treatment of different RDOs. The inflation experienced by workers - who spent high proportions of their income on food, transport and medicines - was not reflected in official statistics. Moreover, pay took no account of workers, most of whom were migrants, having two wives and two families, one in the rural areas from which they came and one in the area where they worked. Both spaces experienced exceptionally high unemployment for women, higher than in most urban areas, so the workers' pay was stretched a long way. Further, the workers, RDOs specifically, were not rewarded for the extremely arduous and dangerous work they undertook. However, pay acted as a lightning rod, an issue around which workers could mobilize, but it was not their only gripe. They also complained about daily humiliation by supervisors and managers, and

much of this was racialized: most of the senior executives were white and all, or virtually all, the manual workers were black.

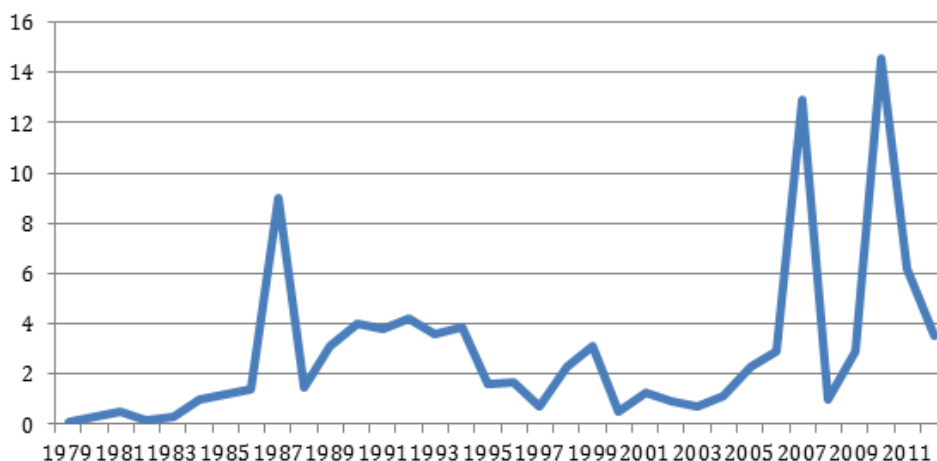
These rifts are similar on other mines and exist to some extent elsewhere in South African life. The massacre revealed how little things have changed in the post-apartheid years, and sometimes they have changed for the worse. The gini co-efficient for income is higher than in 1994, as is the official rate of unemployment. The labour utilization rate stands at about 40 percent, meaning that six out of ten adults of working age are not employed to any degree, and among the rest roughly a third are not regularly employed. Failure to make improvements has been underpinned by neo-liberal economic policies that still, to a large extent, prevail in South Africa. Indeed with the end of apartheid, the state withdrew from some sectors of the economy. Continuities with the past exist elsewhere. For instance, the massacre has revealed that many of the most senior police have held positions since the war in the townships in the 1980s.

The gulf between union leaders and members is especially profound in the case of NUM, but it exists elsewhere too. A *Workers Survey* commissioned by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the main union federation, which was published in 2012, provided figures for corruption. It showed that 43 per cent of the NUM members surveyed knew examples of corruption in their union, and that 20 per cent had first-hand experience. For the COSATU unions as a whole, the figures were 34 per cent and 13 per cent. In other unions, too, top leaders

are paid high salaries and some receive extra income from their employers. One is reminded of *The History of Trade Unionism* by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, first published in 1894, where the authors describe union leaders moving to a villa in a pleasant suburb, where they mix with the middle-classes, including some employers. But workers are increasingly dissatisfied with their unions. In the past two weeks I have spoken to leaders of two left-wing unions who both, without prodding, said they were now under pressure from their members. They were not hostile to this, but they were slightly troubled by the new mood. In one instance, there had been a national bargaining conference where workers had spoken openly about doing a 'Marikana' if necessary. That is, rather than demoralizing workers, the massacre has become a watchword for defiance.

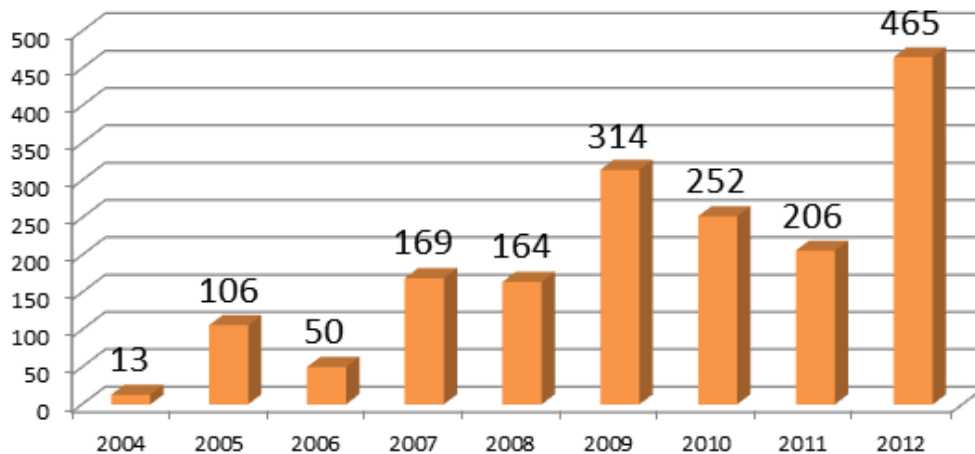
Working-class unrest has been developing for some years, and this is reflected in the graph below, which shows days lost through strike for the years since 1979. 1987, the year of a great miners' strike, had been the record year, but it was eclipsed in 2007 and again in 2011. In both years there were massive public sector workers strikes, with according to a student, Claire Ceruti, who has investigated both actions, a much higher level of grass roots activism in the second stoppage.<sup>11</sup> 2011 saw the fourth most strike days on record, and analysts expect that 2013 will be higher, especially if it includes, as seems likely, a protected strike in the mining industry. Since 2005, South Africa has almost certainly experienced a higher level of strike action than any other country in the world.

### Strike days per year (million), 1979-2012



Data source: Andrew Levy Employment Publications cc

### Community protests per year, 2004-2012



Source: Rebellion of the Poor project, University of Johannesburg

But militancy is not confined to the workplace. Since about 2004, there has been a veritable Rebellion of the Poor, manifested mainly in numerous community protests. I have suggested that South Africa is the protest capital of the world, with, very possibly, more protests per capita than anywhere else.<sup>12</sup> Some of these actions involve less than a hundred people blocking a major highway for a few hours, but some are local insurrections with over 10,000 participants and barricades that exclude the police from working-class neighbourhoods for two or more days. Most of the protests are over issues related to service delivery but, as with strikes over pay, this can be a focus for wider dissatisfaction. Unemployed youth are in the forefront of many protests and unemployment is clearly a major issue. The police have recorded over one thousand illegal gatherings per year in recent years, but do not provide the details. Together with a small team, I have been collecting press reports of protests and we have produced the graph above. For each protest we know the place and date it occurred and often much more than this. The graph reveals a growing number of protests. Moreover, our data shows that the proportion of these protests that are peaceful has now been overtaken by those in our other two categories: violent protests (meaning violence against people or property) and disruptive protests (using burning tyres and so on).<sup>13</sup> Again people are aware of Marikana, and defiance is reflected in the fact that we now

know of four new informal settlements where residents have called their village 'Marikana'.

There is still a high measure of separation between workers/strikes and the poor/community protests. But, as I have argued elsewhere, this is not a class difference – workers and the unemployed are found in the same households and neighbourhoods – rather it is about 'different relationships to the means and ends of protest'.<sup>14</sup> However, there are a growing number of examples of community participation in strikes. This has been the case in some of the platinum battles, with farm labourers in the Western Cape, and, most recently, road blockages in support of workers who clean toilets in the informal settlements around Cape Town. The *Workers Survey*, mentioned earlier, showed that 25 per cent of COSATU's members had participated in a community protest during the preceding four years. This included 30 per cent of the members of the municipal workers' union and 27 per cent of NUM's membership.

#### The political question and democratic struggle

So far, the main response of the African National Congress, the governing party, has been to tighten control over politics, threatening force if necessary. In this, they have worked closely with their ally the South African Congress Party (SACP), whose leaders are government ministers. Recently Cyril Ramaphosa, now deputy president of the ANC (but formerly a

general-secretary of NUM and, until Marikana, a director of Lonmin), said that Rustenburg, the area in which the platinum mines are located, should be 'reclaimed' by the ANC and NUM.<sup>15</sup> Given that NUM has been marginalized on the platinum mines following Marikana, this can be read as some kind of threat. Soon after, Blade Nzimande, general-secretary of the SACP, told a large gathering of NUM shop stewards that AMCU was not a union, it was a group of 'vigilantes and liars' – hardly language designed to further the development of peace on the mines.<sup>16</sup>

This approach has led to rifts. Significantly, the leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, was expelled from the party at its recent conference. Malema, a left populist, was hugely popular among young people, the unemployed in particular, and this constituency has now been disenfranchised. The final nail in Malema's coffin came with Marikana. On 18 August 2012, he addressed a rally of about 12,000 strikers and their families, lambasting capitalism and Zuma, the president, in terms that were often witty and always powerful. In a memorial meeting soon afterwards, he was the keynote speaker when four ministers were chased out of the hall.<sup>17</sup> Then, at the invitation of workers, he went from mine to mine, encouraging workers to strike for their rights. Zwelenzima Vavi, general secretary of COSATU, is another target of the Zuma loyalists, and specifically SACP aligned union leaders (including

NUM's). Vavi has also made strong statements, this time criticizing the gap between unions and their members, union corruption, Zuma, and his opponents in the COSATU leadership. It is possible that he will be removed from the leadership of the federation at the upcoming meeting of its Central Executive Committee. If this does happen it may presage a split in COSATU.

In these circumstances one might expect a growth of the Marxist left in South Africa. This has happened to some degree, but that degree is small. The main organization is the Democratic Left Front, which combines activists with backgrounds in the SACP, various Trotskyist organizations and environmentalist movements. Its main support comes from local social movements, many of which have been involved in the community protests. It also includes the leader of the Marikana Solidarity Campaign and has gained some support among members of the workers' committees on the platinum mines.

However, because of the size of the SACP, with a membership counted in tens of thousands, it is difficult for a small Marxist party to make headway. It is unlikely to make much impact in the general election, scheduled for May 2014. Support for the ANC is definitely declining, especially among young people, but the beneficiaries will probably be the main opposition party, the bourgeois white-led Democratic Alliance, and various other well-established organizations, including the United Democratic Movement, which is based in the Eastern Cape, where many Marikana workers have their rural home. The other development will probably be an increase in the number of abstentions, especially among the youth. This is hardly an optimistic ending, but the trend is clear. There is massive anger against the government, possibilities for major fragments from the ANC – such as the Malema and Vavi supporters – developing new political projects, majority disaffection from the ANC among the youth, a relatively united Marxist alternative, the existence of old black consciousness and pan-Africanist organizations, and most

importantly rising levels of struggles and some convergence of battles involving workers and the poor. All of this has been clarified, sharpened and reinforced by Marikana, an important event, and probably a turning point in South African history.

### Notes

\* This paper was first presented at a conference on 'Return of the Political Question: Crisis of Representation and Democratic Struggle in Africa', Dakar, 22-24 May 2013.

1. Philip Frankel (2013), 'Perpetuating a vile pattern of violence: abnormal is normal on SA mines', *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 19 May, p. 11.
2. William H. Sewell Jr (2005), *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, especially pp. 218-9.
3. 'Events' vary in scale and reveal more or less of underlying structures. Likewise, our understanding of 'turning points' needs to be circumscribed. There are turning points in the histories of families, of institutions etc. and the kind of events that mark these moments will be different from those that concern Sewell.
4. Sewell, *Logics of History*, p. 219.
5. Most details in this section are taken from Peter Alexander et al (2013), *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer*, revised edition, Johannesburg: Jacana Media. The first edition of this book was published by Jacana in 2012 and by Bookmarks (London) in 2013. The second edition will be co-published by Ohio University Press (Athens), and is being translated into German and French.
6. In addition to the killings mentioned, in the days before the massacre a further three workers, NUM members, were killed. Little is known about their deaths.
7. Reported in *Socialist Worker*, 21 August 2013.
8. *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 26 August 2013.
9. Greg Marinovich, 'Conflict of interest, inc.: Mining unions' leaders were representing

their members while corporations' pay', *Daily Maverick*, 13 May 2013.

10. The Marikana Inquiry heard that 52% were NUM, 35% were AMCU and 13% were no union.
11. See Claire Ceruti (2012), 'Unfolding Contradictions on the 'Zuma Movement': The Alliance and the Public Sector Strikes of 2007 and 2010'. In Marcelle C. Dawson & Luke Sinwell, *Contesting Transformation: Popular Resistance in Twenty-first-century South Africa*. London: Pluto Press.
12. Peter Alexander (2012), 'A massive rebellion of the poor.' *Mail & Guardian*, 13 April, p. 34.
13. Carin Runciman, Trevor Ngwane and Peter Alexander (2012), 'Developing a Protest Event Analysis for South Africa's Rebellion of the Poor'. Paper presented to 18th Conference on Alternative Futures and Popular Protest, Manchester 25-27 March.
14. Peter Alexander and Peter Pfaffe (forthcoming) 'Social Relationships to the Means and Ends of Protest in South Africa's Ongoing Rebellion of the Poor: the Balfour Insurrections.' *Social Movement Studies*. See also, Peter Alexander (2010) 'Rebellion of the Poor: South Africa's Service Delivery Protests – a Preliminary Analysis,' *Review of African Political Economy* 123: 25-40; Peter Alexander (2012), 'Barricades, Ballots and Experimentation: Making Sense of the 2011 Local Government Elections with a Social Movement Lens'. In Marcelle C. Dawson & Luke Sinwell, *Contesting Transformation: Popular Resistance in Twenty-first-century South Africa*. London: Pluto Press; 2013: Peter Alexander, Claire Ceruti, Keke Motseke, Mosa Phadi and Kim Wale (2013), *Class in Soweto*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.
15. Gia Nicolaidis (2013), 'Ramaphosa: Rustenburg belongs to NUM', *Eyewitness News*, 2 May.
16. Rapule Tabane (2013), 'AMCU's no union, it's just vigilantes and liars, say alliance bosses', *Mail and Guardian*, 17 May, p. 2.
17. Charl du Plessis (2012), 'Malema steal the show at Marikana memorial', *City Press* (online), 23 August.