

## Bring in peacemakers; give workers respect

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By John Capel

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Chris Griffith of Anglo American Platinum (Amplats) says it all. His is an attitude of, “I am entitled to R17.6 million a year. I’m at work not on strike; must I deal with all this nonsense for nothing? I’m demanding to be paid what I’m worth.”

Lonmin fires more than 200 essential workers just as tensions mount, and, before that, four deaths occurred.

Impala Platinum (Implats) says the majority of its workers want to return to work. All of this is provocative and speaks a language of war. Griffith displays an attitude of entitlement.

The president of the country earns about R2.5m a year, cabinet ministers with bigger responsibility even less. So why does Griffith, whose workforce is on strike, a strike he is unable to settle, feel he is entitled to such a salary?

Workers, on the other hand, are also demanding what they are worth. Would Griffith last one day underground, drilling and breaking up rock, under extreme heat, and associated dust problems? This is where real value is added to the company.

For dealing with all this “nonsense”, he and his company are unable to deal with workers constructively. Arrogance is the language at play.

The public at large bemoans this culture of entitlement among senior and even junior public servants. This culture is dangerous. It is greed at its worst, and it only fuels tensions.

Lonmin, like Amplats and Implats, is ill advised on how to deal with the strike. First the text messages to workers, leading to divisions and suspicions, and then the so-called hit list.

Four deaths later they insist on firing workers. Why now, so late into the strike? Purely to fuel tensions. Implats will have us all believe that the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union is not representative of the workers.

The majority want to return to work, they say. But there is no proof their divide-and-rule tactics are helping. On the contrary, the companies seem unwilling to deal with the difficult issues challenging them.

Bench Marks has argued that the companies must first accept that worker demands are legitimate.

Second, that this is more than just a strike. As a writer in the Sunday Times said, this is deep-rooted conflict. Deep-rooted conflict requires extraordinary interventions, not sending in the army, but sending in peacemakers, people who understand why and what has given rise to this dispute. It requires leadership, deal-making and lots of imaginative thinking.

All the parties to the dispute must be committed to ending this strike, peacefully. A change in language; threats, propaganda and personality attacks must stop.

The substantive issues, respect and dignity of workers, will lead to an environment for negotiation to open up.

Trust is essential, and for the companies continually to discredit the representative union does not help.

The platinum strike is far more than a normal strike. It is like a mini Arab Spring, and either leads us to a better future by addressing the underlying issues of dignity and respect seen in the wage demands, or we lose a chance. Issues cannot be swept under the table. We cannot remain dismissive of this deep-rooted conflict between labour and capital.

Yes, the corporations can sit this out – and then what? Can the country sit this out? It's reflective of our democracy, hard won by workers, in part.

In the end, history will record this strike and more questions than answers will be raised. Will it reflect where we want our young democracy to go, or will it reflect a clamping down on the human right to strike, as many commentators will have us believe will be to our benefit?

Bench Marks thinks not. It will be the beginning of the end of our human rights culture and a signal of draconian interventions, which will haunt us forever. Maturity is needed and this must begin with the companies, followed by the government and the unions. Bring in the peacemakers! Now.

John Capel is executive director of Bench Marks Foundation