

BUSINESSREPORT

Endgame of mine strike is a test of democracy

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Reuters

Striking platinum workers listen to Joseph Mathunjwa, the president of the Association of Mine workers and Construction Union, at the Wonderkop stadium in Nkaneng township outside the Lonmin mine in Rustenburg yesterday. Photo: Reuters

On Sunday I received a call from a Bench Marks Foundation community monitor in Marikana. He said he had just witnessed an attack on a worker from Mozambique. He was fatally burnt in his shack. "What the companies are doing is wrong," he said.

Going to workers directly and bypassing the collective representative of workers is leading to suspicion and is turning worker against worker. This will result in xenophobia and the killing of more people.

The Bench Marks Foundation, in a recent opinion piece, indicated that the companies' actions - going directly to workers - would lead to a host of problems and social unrest.

The community monitor also told me about the occasion when negotiations broke down between the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu) and the three big platinum producers. Progress was being made.

Then a senior Chamber of Mines official entered the room. He had a few words with the chief executives of Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), Impala Platinum (Implats) and Lonmin. After this the whole mood changed. Negotiations were over.

Evidently it was said that if workers' demands were given into, strikes would happen in the gold and coal sectors for the same level of wages.

A political message was delivered. As one of our monitors asked: was this about protecting the tripartite alliance and embedded interests? If this is true, our democracy is being tested.

Now the companies have gone directly to their workers, sowing division and suspicion and creating havoc; several deaths bear testimony to this. As the Bench Marks monitor pointed out, in 2012 Lonmin refused to negotiate with workers directly. These were workers who were not represented by either the National Union of Mineworkers or Amcu.

Only after the massacre did Lonmin negotiate. Now the companies send out text messages and pamphlets to workers calling on them to return to work. But it is workers who give the union the mandate.

My sources tell me that workers' resolve is high. The strikers are aware that 34 workers died, they say, so they could have a living wage. A common refrain among workers is "what would their ancestors say if we returned to work?"

It can be argued that this is not a normal strike. It is more than a normal strike. We face a moral and ethical dilemma in our democracy. The strike has its roots in the "Marikana massacre".

How this strike is dealt with will be a reflection of our democracy. Workers have a constitutional right to strike and to choose a union they believe can represent their interests.

The strike arises from huge anger, resentment and frustration of workers not benefiting from the fruits of democracy. Wages and living conditions are central themes.

But so is human dignity, hope for a better life, and to be treated in a humane and respectful manner. So why is it that this strike seems to go on endlessly?

In whose interest is it to sow conflict? If there are vested interests preventing the settlement of the strike, we have a problem. The tripartite alliance has interests and so do the mine bosses. Many of the Rustenburg mine shafts are coming to the end of their lives and it's a good time for the industry to restructure.

It seems as if there is no political will to resolve the strike. What is transpiring - the killing of workers, the potential for xenophobic reactions and the lack of will on the part of the companies and the government to end this strike peacefully - spells absolute disaster. We have a crisis of epic proportions, and this needs to be addressed. The government needs to remain impartial.

Worst of all is the way Amplats, Implats and Lonmin use the media to convey an impression of workers wanting to return to work. There is no evidence that workers at large want to do

so. On the contrary, they believe they are fighting for their human dignity, like Nelson Mandela.

The result is to pit worker against worker, to sow divisions and to use the media to apportion blame on workers. It is socially irresponsible and all three companies will eventually be held liable for their actions.

No doubt the companies will suffer reputational damage and are already countering this through a well-orchestrated media campaign. But workers and local communities will never forget, and they will be there once all the damage is done.

Let's say the government backs the companies' strategy of breaking the strike and of protecting the tripartite alliance. We envisage the army being called in to force workers back to work, which has already begun. But it won't work.

The social unrest such action will cause will deepen the crisis, ending with much bloodshed. We cannot allow this to happen.

While the media is fixated on blaming the union, and is fed many myths in this regard, none of it is helpful.

What happened on August 16, 2012 is alive in workers' minds: 34 workers were needlessly killed in one day. They know their struggle is their destiny. Workers on that fateful day were treated worse than dogs. This sentiment cannot be ignored.

Any strike anywhere can be settled if dealt with properly. What seems to be lacking is political will to solve the longest mining strike in our history.

So who is to blame? Partly it is due to the response of the industry, which has the expertise available, and partly the failure of outside agencies central to resolutions of labour disputes, and partly vested interests.

Yet, it is not a normal strike! It goes to the heart of democracy, where economic transformation - articulated in better working conditions, wages and living conditions - has not been felt by workers.

Negotiations have been patchy. As a former union negotiator, I know that serious mediation requires commitment. The parties should be locked up in a room for two weeks to arrive at a settlement. But now this seems a lost opportunity.

The sword has been drawn and, no matter what, this strike is going to be broken, come hell or high water. Never mind the social consequences and the blood that will be spilt.

This weekend 16 mining communities are meeting in Rustenburg to see how they can intervene to resolve this crisis.

Bishop Jo Seoka, as Anglican bishop of the area, is calling for high-level intervention of church, community and other leaders. His focus will be on what is just and what is the right thing to do.

Moral leadership is needed. Are the companies' actions morally defensible or are they morally reprehensible? Likewise for the government. The companies' actions - going behind the recognised union's back, sowing confusion and division among workers - can lead only to further breaking down of trust.

Seoka wants to avoid this at all costs. We hope the companies and the government welcome this intervention, for where they have failed maybe the church leaders' delegation can succeed.

Furthermore, a call for a state of emergency really is an outright call for war against the workers. The only way this issue can be dealt with is peacefully. That is why the bishop is putting together this high-level delegation to avert more bloodshed and to ensure the parties reach agreement. In addition, it's time for the strike to be given national importance.

High-level intervention using the best mediators and negotiators is needed, Seoka says. People with technical expertise, with an understanding of the dire socio-economic issues affecting workers, and for that matter communities, need to be involved. They need to unpack what each party wants and find a way through what can now only be described as a national tragedy.

Mines are complex operations, with thousands of workers graded according to the work they perform. There are entry-level workers and skilled workers like rock drillers, blasters and refinery workers. All have their own sets of needs and challenges, and each category's interests have to be dealt with in the negotiations.

Amcu needs to assess the forces against it and respond appropriately. It must deal with any member involved in intimidation or possible killings. It is not in the union's interests to allow any violence to occur, no matter how members are provoked by the companies trying to break the strike. I doubt the union is behind the killings; maybe some members are.

The union needs to counter the propaganda being used against it. Now more than ever, it needs to ensure the discipline of its members. It needs to maintain the moral high ground and not allow the actions of the corporations and state to muddle it up.

The companies need to reassess how they are dealing with the strike. They need to engage the representative union in good faith and not take advice to the contrary.

The concern of Bench Marks is the welfare of people and their dignity, and to ensure this strike is peacefully resolved.

If not, our democracy is weakened, social unrest will be the norm, and the losers will be all of us. Now we can only pray and ask the country as a whole to support the church leaders' intervention.

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