

## **Peacemakers- an unlikely bunch**

The peace makers have arrived but not in the form originally anticipated. The balance of power is changing. No longer is the public sympathetic towards the cries of the platinum industry bosses. Public opinion is shifting and pressure is mounting on the corporations to act responsibly. Lonmin singled themselves out by going public, texting workers and using the media arguing that workers want to return to work. 5 deaths later they seem not to have learnt anything from their role in the Marikana massacre. This culture of treating workers merely as instruments for profits they don't share in equitably, need to be addressed.

Then they criticise Gift of the Givers and other NGO's who feed starving workers and their families. Now traditional leaders, 16 mining communities called BUA, meaning Voice are also supporting the mine workers strike. Churches are raising their voice, others are sending in food parcels. On Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014, 300 mainly middle class people gathered at Orbit jazz club in Braamfontein to stand in solidarity with the workers. They raised about R50 000 for workers and their families. The mood was jovial and full of hope that perhaps now we can address the scourge of inequality and bring freedom to all. Public sentiment and support for the plight of workers will ultimately decide how this strike is settled. It will be interesting to see how the companies interpret this support. This is why societal opinion is important and hopefully this won't fall on deaf ears.

Significantly, governments new minister responsible mines; Mr Ramatlhodi is making all the right noises. By recognising that Amcu is a legitimate trade union and going on to say that government must treat them with respect and give them the dignity that is due raises hope that this strike can be settled. He has been admirable in meeting with both the union and employers and setting up a technical task team, means that finally government is playing the role it should have all along. Will the companies now begin to be more proactive and deal with the real issue, not only wages but fundamental change that gives workers dignity.

The corporations will have to accept they are losing their media propaganda campaign. Inflammatory statements like Griffith of Implats, defending his R17.6 million a year income, and saying, well "I have to deal with all this all this nonsense" is galvanising a societal backlash. Ben Megara of Lonmin implies that food parcels are prolonging the strike. What is really being said by these companies CEO's is lets starve the workers into submission? What a blunder. The peacemakers, civil society organisations and the public at large are now watching and be sure the spotlight is on the companies and the state. They are being forced into a corner, to act responsibly, to address the cries of workers and to do so soon. And now Mineral Resources is intervening and this spells hope for a peace resolution. Maybe he can get the companies to change their language and provocative actions.

Communities and traditional leaders have taken positions. Public opinion is changing and fast. This awakening is crucial and cannot be ignored by these corporations and other interest groups who prefer to starve workers to death.

The TRC let corporations get off scot-free even if they were complicit in supporting apartheid. In the 90's companies like Implats promoted suspect trade unions, like Workers Mouth Piece, that resulted in conflict and deaths. Very little changed for corporations in the new South Africa, in fact their profits quadrupled but at the expense of our democracy. Companies only pay a quarter of

South Africa's taxes, with ordinary tax payers paying 60%. Workers pay tax and a low wage economy means less money for development. Of course the more money circulating in the economy means increased demand for goods and services and the stimulation of new jobs to meet increasing demand. So wages are central to our developmental path and the much needed jobs we need. Now these companies have a chance to address fundamental transformation.

The platinum strike does not come from nowhere. It's a humane problem, one of human dignity, of respect for workers who dig out the minerals that they do not share in equitably. Ramatlhodi has recognised this. The change in tone from government from threats, to recognising the deeper issues at play, of respect and dignity is welcome change and can lead to a settlement. Inflammatory remarks and actions will not resolve the impasse? This change in tone by government can.

We know that the poor and working class have not shared as they should in our new democracy. We must recognise is that we are sitting on a time bomb and the mining industry can act as a catalyst for change. Government has the opportunity to lead this now. Cosmetic changes required by the mining charter have failed to address the underlying issues of socio-economic inequality. It's just not sustainable. Ramatlhodi will do well to address this as well. Workers and impacted communities have not shared in the platinum wealth produced. Communities too are feeling the pinch, as they are dependent on workers' wages for their own survival. Remember employment of local people is low, the industry relies on migrant labour. Over 50% of people in Bojanala district are unemployed; the district includes Marikana, Chaneng, Luka, and in total over 36 communities. When workers starve communities starve.

Now the eyes of the country are on the platinum producers to do the right thing. More and more people are now beginning to understand what is really happening. Public sentiment is not favouring the corporations. They need to recognise the gravity of the situation, the desperation, the resolve of workers, and commit to dealing with wages firstly and then all the underlying issues. Government too needs to have the political will to address the lack of meaningful transformation in mining. Perhaps then we can address this nationally in all sectors, where sectors like retail supermarkets pay as a low as R2000 a month.

The Bench Marks Global Principles for Corporate Social Responsibility now recognized as one of the 4 main international instruments pertaining to sustainable development has this to say about wages. The question is what a living wage is.

Wages are measured at five levels. Firstly a marginal survival wage which does not provide for adequate nutritional needs. Starvation is prevented. Secondly a basic survival wage that allows for meeting immediate survival needs including basic food used clothing, minimal shelter, fuel for cooking. And thirdly, a short- term planning wage that meets basic survival needs, with some discretionary income allowing for minimal planning beyond living from pay-day to pay-day. Fourthly, a sustainable living wage that meets basic needs, including food, clothing, housing, energy, transportation, health care, and education. It allows for the setting aside of small amounts of money (savings) and planning for cultural events, weddings and funerals and the future purchase of items and the meeting of needs. Lastly a sustainable community wage that not only meets basic needs but allows workers to set aside money for future purchases, and discretionary income to support the development of small businesses in a local community and the support of cultural and civic needs of

the community. This wage allows for long range planning and participation. Hopefully this can be used a guide when determining what a living wage is.

The peacemakers in the form of public sentiment and support for the workers are all we have to ensure that the strike is dealt with humanely. Sure the industry can sit out this strike; it can continue to try and divide workers, sow confusion, and attempt to break the strike. But at the end of the day, it is the country that suffers. We cannot go on as if this is a normal strike, it's not. It goes to the heart of our democracy and raises awkward questions of fair wealth distribution. It means we have to deal with the bigger challenges facing the nation, whether in farming, fisheries, retail, construction and of course labour brokers that are further starving the economy from growing as they rob workers of a better wage.

Poor communities and workers are demanding economic liberation, a better life, one of abundance that meets their dignity as human beings. After all, we as a nation cannot afford to ignore the symbolism of the strike, and what it urges us as a nation to address. Do we want peace and security! Or should we ignore what is at stake, we will eventually regret and the country will go up in flames. So let's get real. Economic justice is needed. But know the peace makers are watching. Ultimately it is the mining industry that will be held accountable! So settle this strike and address the deep rooted causes.

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What is happening is healthy for our democracy if dealt with properly. Of course if the authorities fail to recognise this, we are in trouble, big trouble, and an opportunity is lost to fundamentally address the big issue of growing inequality.

