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Scaling Up? TRANSNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISING IN GLOBALISED PRODUCTION

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LUKE SINWELL

Workers' Power in Marikana: Building Bridges of Solidarity in South Africa's Platinum Mines (2012-2014)

ABSTRACT Between 2012 and 2014, South Africa witnessed an unprecedented labour movement culminating in a five-month strike at what were then the three largest platinum mining companies in the world. Drawing from ethnographic research and in-depth interviews, this article traces the multiple scales within which mineworkers organised collectively, forging unity outside of traditional trade union affiliations. What began as a 'living wage' demand amongst a small number of a specific category of workers at one shaft, in one company, soon spread across the entire industry capturing the hearts and minds of 80,000 platinum mineworkers. Mineworkers' ability to exercise power was intensified by their decision to jump scale and build bridges across companies and regions and to a lesser extent transnationally. The article also describes forms of solidarity in communities, especially by women, and the broader trade union movement and concludes by focusing on the fragmented nature of the working class in South Africa more generally. With few important exceptions, the extent to which mineworkers were able to exercise power beyond a relatively local or narrow scale is quite limited, despite this large-scale mobilisation.

KEYWORDS *mineworkers, Marikana, trade unions, jumping scale*

1. Introduction

On 16 August 2012, 34 Black mineworkers were gunned down by police under the auspices of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), in what has become known as the Marikana massacre. Marikana is the small town at the site of the Lonmin platinum mine in the Northwest province

of South Africa, where workers were striking at the time. The massacre not only resulted in an outcry internationally, including by former anti-apartheid activists, some of whom had boycotted South Africa's economy until the first democratic elections in 1994, but it also led to foundational political shifts within the country. It opened up spaces which appeared to be further left of the tripartite alliance made up of the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). This included the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the so-called 'NUMSA moment' (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa), whereby the largest trade union in the country broke from the Alliance (with the ANC) and began the process of forming a United Front to challenge the adoption of neoliberal and anti-working class policies by the ruling ANC. According to one analyst (Alexander 2013), the Marikana massacre was a turning point in the history of the country. Indeed, to a significant extent, militant workers and communities would turn against the ANC and the tripartite alliance, declaring that it was too cozy with the bosses and represented the interest of capital, rather than poor and working class people.

While other scholarly works deal with the relationship between the Marikana massacre and what this means for the politics and history of the country more generally (Sinwell 2019), this article centres on the period between 2012 and 2014 when mineworkers led strike actions. I focus specifically on the relatively immediate origins of strike action at one shaft, Karee, in what was then called the Lonmin platinum mine¹. Workers in this shaft demanded a 'living wage' of R12,500, more than twice their salaries at the time, and this was the amount for which 34 workers died on the mountain in Marikana. The narrative presented in the body of this article demonstrates the way in which a relatively modest and seemingly apolitical attempt to improve working conditions and to adjust salaries became part of a multi-pronged set of solidarity interventions.

The research undertaken for the purposes of this article seeks to answer the following question: in what ways did mineworkers organise in the period 2012 and 2014? In addition, it seeks to identify major efforts at building solidarity beyond the so-called local level. The conclusion unpacks the significance of these efforts in the context of fragmentation amongst the working class in South Africa more generally. The article

suggests that the local level provides the potential and only meaningful basis for ‘jumping scale’ to others’ spaces, through which to engage in a collective project to improve living and working conditions. What is in the workers’ minds, their individual and collective consciousness, when he or she mobilises locally, is of central importance. A relatively tiny layer of activists within and beyond the contemporary mineworkers’ movement in South Africa undertook processes which were “place-based while acting *across* space” (ibid.). In order to address the locally specific interests of workers and their demands, activists require a “global sense of place” (Antonsich 2010: 331). To put it another way, it is incumbent upon workers, but also activists more generally, to “reach ... out from local ... identities to find threads that enable solidarity and extend lines of power for those that remain otherwise trapped in place” (Swyngedouw 1997: 168 in Castree et al. 2004: 210).

The mineworkers’ movement was a response to the shifting nature of the political economy, both nationally and internationally. Gold was historically at the epicentre of South Africa’s ‘mineral revolution’ from the end of the 19th century, which was rooted in the perceived need for cheap Black labour to dig out the precious metal. By the 1990s, the far more volatile platinum industry was booming. South Africa to a significant extent controlled the market, since at the time it held more than 80% of the underground reserves. When South Africa repositioned itself within the global economy in the post-apartheid period, mining industries sought headquarters overseas. This included then platinum powerhouses Lonmin and Amplats, which, at the time of the strikes, had headquarters in London. Importantly, BASF, based in Germany, is the biggest chemical company in the world and in 2012 it was responsible for purchasing about half of Lonmin’s platinum annually. It has been accused of being complicit in the exploitation of mineworkers, but strikers themselves have not geared their demands towards this specific aspect of the global production network. While rank and file mineworkers did not explicitly seek to organise workers at a transnational level in other countries, their local and regional organisation directly shaped global production networks to the extent that they stopped extracting platinum for refinement.

The prices of platinum, and commodities generally, skyrocketed in the late 1990s and 2000s, but the profits went mainly to shareholders – many

of them overseas – and not to workers. This left mineworkers overstretched. They were digging out platinum from underground, working overtime, but their wages remained largely untouched. After 2008 there was an emergent sense of crisis within the industry, “driven by the collapse of global demand in a context of massive over-investment, heightened competition and mounting corporate debt” (Capps 2015: 497). In 2010, there were nearly 25,000 more workers in the platinum industry in South Africa than in the gold one and, overall, the largest trade union in the country at the time (NUM) boasted more than 350,000 members. Between 2012 and 2014, South Africa witnessed an unprecedented labour movement, culminating in a five-month strike (the longest in the country’s mining history) at what were then the three largest platinum companies in the world.

Drawing on ethnographic research and several in-depth interviews which were undertaken during this tumultuous period, this article traces the multiple scales within which mineworkers organised collectively. After providing context, I proceed by detailing, in the section thereafter, what is arguably the most precise or narrow ‘geographical scale’ or place in which to organise: two particular workers in the changing rooms at one shaft in one mining company, who began a process which then spread to other shafts, companies and regions. It then details how the women of Marikana became involved at another ‘scale’, linking community and worker struggles, before highlighting the solidarity actions of communities from outside Marikana (who had themselves experienced police brutality for standing up for their rights). In the following section, I lay out the political and historical context within which these micro-processes took place. What began as a ‘living wage’ demand, originating amongst a small number of a specific category of workers at one shaft, in one company, soon spread across the entire industry, capturing the hearts and minds of 80,000 platinum mineworkers who would join the independent and upstart union. The idea of a ‘living wage’ also seeped into the consciousness of dispossessed communities, some of which crossed regional boundaries in order to provide working-class solidarity. The article also suggests that, although AMCU was critical in harnessing the unprecedented unity amongst workers in the platinum mines, this was limited to the specific sector, and leadership tended to block rank and file activists who wished “to jump scale” and “bridge spaces” (Merk 2009) beyond this.

2. Context of scales of power in the platinum mines in South Africa

Workers at the then three platinum giants – Amplats, Impala and Lonmin – each undertook extensive unprotected strikes in 2012. The term ‘unprotected’ is used to describe a strike where workers’ jobs are not ‘protected’ by the Labour Relations Act (LRA). Without this, workers can easily be fired. By the end of January 2012 at Impala (then the world’s second largest platinum mine), worker unrest had spread beyond the informal collective of rock drill operators (RDOs), and virtually the entire workforce had downed tools. That first strike ended on 3 March, and the RDO’s pay was increased to R9,000. Discontent with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which was then the largest trade union in the ANC’s tripartite alliance, came to a head at Impala because the union opposed the popular, unprotected strike. By the end of the strike, management had fired 18,000 of the striking mineworkers. This effectively ended their union membership. About 11,000 others had resigned as NUM members at Impala by 30 March 2012. The perceived shortcomings of the union at each of the three major platinum mining companies, especially its failure to defend workers subject to dismissal for engaging in unprotected strikes, provided the immediate structural conditions in which informal worker committees arose, and a mineworkers’ movement took hold (see Chinguno 2015a, 2015b).

What began in 2012 as disparate and localised forms of rebellion, with relatively weak or seemingly non-existent ‘bridges’ between the three mining companies and the different shafts within them, was transformed into a wide-scale movement under the auspices of the ‘upstart’ union AMCU. The NUM, which had previously been in the driver seat in the platinum belt and was once a social movement linking community-based and worker struggles together to fight apartheid, was now seen by many rank and file workers to be in the pockets of management. By 2013, the vast majority of workers across the entire platinum belt had joined AMCU, and in 2014 the union led an intensive five-month strike. The workers were demanding a living wage of R12,500 across the platinum mines.

A few notes on union membership will provide the reader with context. On a national scale, AMCU’s membership increased from about 10,000

members in 2011 to about 120,000 in 2013, and, in the platinum sector as a whole, AMCU grew to 70 per cent of the workforce. In that year, the NUM dropped from more than 50 per cent to about 20 per cent membership in the sector (Niefertgodien 2017). Between 2011 and 2015, the union lost about 40 per cent of its 300,000 members overall. At a central committee meeting held in Pretoria in June 2016, the NUM's general secretary, David Sipunzi, noted that, "Our drop was mostly affected by the incident [unprotected strikes and police killings] in Rustenburg, where we experienced most membership losses" (Giokos/Mahlati 2016). In the present period, as we shall see, AMCU is competing for membership with NUMSA, which has gained ground, particularly at Impala platinum (Mndebele 2021).

Two important 'tectonic shifts' occurred after the Marikana massacre, both of which continue to have important implications for mine workers' political identities and for the building of an alternative left movement outside the framework of the ruling ANC. First is the EFF, which positions itself as an anti-capitalist, black consciousness political party. It was in fact launched in 2013 in Marikana. Its President and Commander in Chief Julius Malema, indicated that he and his colleagues chose to launch the EFF at the mountain in Marikana because mine workers had died for their 'economic freedom.' Many mineworkers, especially those who joined AMCU, have since developed a firm relationship with the EFF. This is in part because the EFF manifesto officially adopted mine workers' radical demand of R12,500. In the 2014 national elections, when the EFF gained more than one million votes (about six per cent of voters), the party became the official opposition to the ANC in the Northwest province, where many mineworkers left the ruling party and joined it.

A second aspect of the 'tectonic shift', with important implications for South Africa's left politics and beyond, is the breaking away of NUMSA from the ANC alliance. While AMCU and NUMSA do not have a strong working relationship, in the aftermath of Marikana they both stood against the ANC government. With the decline of the NUM, AMCU grew proportionately, but NUMSA became the largest trade union in South Africa, with approximately 350,000 members. At the end of 2013, the union made a decision to end its ongoing support for the ruling ANC, citing Marikana's massacre as one key reason. This set the stage for a historically momentous process that led to the union being expelled from the

COSATU and forming the United Front to bring together workers and community members across the country.

The massacre, which many mineworkers believed was endorsed by the ruling ANC, transformed the political identities of tens of thousands of mineworkers. The result was a growing distance between them and the tripartite alliance (which includes the NUM), offering the possibility that AMCU would be an important, if not integral, part of the new left political formations which were in their infancy in 2014, when mineworkers sustained five months of strike action. Before detailing broader political forces and the role of women in Marikana in providing solidarity, the next section captures in ethnographic detail the emergence of the sub-movement at Lonmin, the Karee shaft in particular, which is located around the community of Marikana where the massacre of 34 mineworkers took place. Management responses, as well as the massacre and state repression, led activists within and beyond Marikana to 'build bridges' and to 'jump scale' outside of the local contexts within which their struggles tended to be waged.

3. Meeting in the changing rooms: Micro-scale mobilisation

The collective mobilisation at Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana began with a concern amongst a specific category of workers, Rock Drill Operators (RDOs), at one shaft called Karee. There were two other shafts, Eastern and Western. RDOs are the workers who drill into the rock at the stope face, into which explosives are inserted in order to blast out the rock-containing ore. Since the introduction of the current (known as Patterson) pay scales in 1973, they are some of the least well-paid underground workers, although they do the most dangerous work. At Karee shaft, as we shall see, a small group of RDOs were concerned that at their shaft, unlike Western and Eastern, they did not have assistants to help them with the drill. These workers also began discussions about the demand for a 'living wage' of R12,500. The management response to their two demands (providing assistants and an increase in wages) in June and July 2012 was that they could consider giving mineworkers their shaft assistants, but the demand for R12,500 would have to be considered in consultation with the other two

shafts (Eastern and Western). RDOs at Karee responded by 'building bridges' between the RDOs at the other shafts, thereby extending the 'scale' of the demands from one isolated shaft to others.

The mineworkers' movement at Lonmin was initiated by a small group of RDOs at Karee who decided to put aside their union affiliation and form an independent, ad hoc committee. It began in May 2012, when one RDO at Karee, who was on leave at the time, considered the prospects of obtaining R12,500. He persuaded another worker (affiliated with a different union) and then several more, until more than 100 workers supported the demand and it became a collective effort. First, some brief background: in May 2011, a prominent NUM shop steward nicknamed 'Steve', whom workers at all three Lonmin mine shafts viewed as a genuine leader, was fired by the NUM for violating their constitution. Soon thereafter, virtually the entire Karee workforce went on an unprotected strike in defence of Steve, and management dismissed about 9,000 workers. This led to management selectively re-hiring most workers, but about 1,400 were not rehired. Lonmin representatives went in search of new workers, especially RDOs, to fill the gap in their workforce. From the workers' perspective, they had been fired by the NUM, which was viewed as siding with management and undermining their interests. In that context, AMCU began to recruit at Karee. By the time of the 9 August 2012 strike, NUM had barely 20 per cent membership at Karee, while AMCU had over 50 per cent. When combined with the other two Lonmin mines, Eastern and Western, however, the NUM represented the majority with 58 per cent of the total workforce (Da Costa n. d.: 149). This was to change drastically in the months to follow, as NUM membership declined significantly.

Molapo had come from Impala, where RDOs were now making comparatively more money than they did at Lonmin, due to the Impala strike earlier in the year. Although at Karee the drilling machine was lighter than those at Eastern and Western, and designed for single operators, he was nevertheless disappointed that in Karee, unlike in the other two major Lonmin shafts, RDOs had no assistants to carry the cumbersome machine. While Molapo, a worker, was on leave in early 2012, he observed: "I found the money at Lonmin, it's small. As the money is so small, it was clear that Lonmin doesn't have the truth. It was apartheid. They don't treat people equally... Those that they [management] liked, they gave them assistants.

And there are those that they... don't give assistants. That's the thing that hurt my heart the most, when I look at my salary. The money, it's small... after deduction, it comes to R4000, R3900. That's the thing that triggers me. And then I end up calling the guys and say, 'Hey...let's approach the management about this money'" (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). Molapo met a man named Mbulelo and they had a discussion in the changing rooms after completing a tough day's work underground in late May 2012. They had both been working at Lonmin for less than a year, but that day they began a process of uniting workers – one that has gone down in history.

They discussed a basic salary which they believed would adequately compensate them for their work: R12,500. Molapo remembers the conversation he had with Mbulelo: "We sat down, two of us. And then we said, because we see that we are earning 4,500, some 4,900, [we thought our salary should be] 5000 plus [an additional] 5000... We took the wages we are earning, we multiply it times two. And then we saw that if we can take the salary that we are getting and multiply it twice, that this will be an amount of money that can satisfy us... according to the work we are doing... That's why when I spoke to the workers I said, 12,500 is the money that can satisfy us" (Interview Mbulelo, 15 August 2013). He noted further that the additional R2,500 (on top of the 10,000 which was approximately twice the salary of an RDO) would come from management's 'sympathy' for the workers: "he can put some other cents that come from him [and] when it combines with this R10,000, it will be like R12,500" (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013).

4. Bypassing union membership as the basis for organising

The workers at Karee shaft were members of both NUM and AMCU, but they decided to unite as workers more generally. Instead of narrowly confining themselves to union membership, the fact that they worked hard as RDOs led them to network and build unity amongst themselves. Molapo told the workers, "We don't have to meet these union guys because we will confuse ourselves. Because there are two [unions], we don't know which will agree and which will disagree. It's our right to approach manage-

ment if things are not going well” (Interview Molapo, 19 September 2014). During that initial conversation in late May 2012, when the two RDOs had met in the changing rooms, Molapo recalled, “We reached a point where we talked about combining workers” (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). Molapo and Mbulelo agreed, “Even if it can be like five RDOs, it will be fine. Five to 10 people and discuss... this issue” (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). They called a meeting with other Karee RDOs. They mobilised by word of mouth, and at the first meeting there were indeed the five or 10 people that Molapo and Mbulelo had hoped for. They discussed the fact that, at Karee, RDOs were paid the same amount as other workers in Eastern and Western, but they were not given an assistant.

Management, at this early stage, willingly negotiated. Management agreed with the workers to set up a task team to examine the work they were doing. Workers wanted to know about the allowance, and they were also concerned about the R12,500. The decision to give the RDOs at Karee an R750 allowance (or bonus) was signed by Exco on 27 July (Witness Statement Da Costa, 23 September 2012: 79). One might have expected that this increase would have kept the RDOs at bay, given that the RDO workers’ committee was largely born out of the fact that at Karee RDOs had no assistants. But the R12,500 demand had become engrained in their minds, and in the minds of those workers waiting for the report back.

It seemed that, among some workers, it was already R12,500 or nothing. According to Molapo, the two RDOs responded to the offer by saying: “you [da Costa] can give us your R750 but what we are saying is that we need R12,500” (Interview Molapo, 28 September 2013). They thus concluded that Da Costa had said that, while the R750 could be given to Karee, the R12,500 that they were requesting could not be determined by Karee only, but was a matter for all of Lonmin to consider. At the Karee shaft specifically, this was part of an attempt by management to “downscale the negotiation of wages and working conditions, and hence confine workers’ struggles to the local scale, or even to the level of the firm” (Bergene 2007: 146 in Merk 2009: 603). And yet, management’s attempt to quell the workers with an offer of an extra R750 per month backfired. The relatively speedy unilateral decision indicated to workers that management had money sitting in their coffers. The isolation of RDOs at Karee would soon be broken and this would have major ramifications for the

development of the strike. At the report back to the RDOs at Karee it was concluded that RDOs from Eastern and Western (the other two shafts at Lonmin) should join them in a collective struggle for R12,500. Soon, workers not only united with RDOs in other shafts, but virtually every underground worker joined in a strike action on 9 August 2012, before the police shot 34 mineworkers waiting for the employer on the now infamous mountain. While this section detailed how workers bypassed the unions at one company, the next investigates the ways in which they united workers from different companies and also how activists built bridges between labour and community struggles.

5. Uniting the platinum sector and labour and community struggles

The workers' struggle in Marikana would lead to the building of working-class bridges: 1) amongst mineworkers from other shafts and mines; 2) to other sectors; and 3), perhaps most importantly after the massacre, to communities where local women in particular became highly politicised and central to solidarity actions during this and subsequent strikes. Indeed, after the massacre, the strike at Lonmin in Marikana intensified even further. What appeared as a major victory in September 2012 at Lonmin (a 22% wage increase) prompted other employees in various workplaces over the next two months to engage in unprotected strike action, including in the gold, diamond and coal industries, and spreading eventually to automobile and truck manufacturing and the public sector. The farmworkers' struggle in the Western Cape province also gained traction, as exploited workers also demanded a minimum daily living wage (Wilderman 2015). While independent worker committees had been central to the organisation of the 2012 strikes and building networks outside of the Rustenburg region in Limpopo, which also contains platinum (Sinwell 2019), they were soon marginalised by the new union (AMCU) (Ntswana 2014; Sinwell 2016). By 2013, AMCU had gained formal recognition and then proceeded to "synchronise" the demand for R12,500 "at all the major platinum producers" (Chinguno 2019: 71).

A worker named Zakhele, who migrated from Flag Staff in the rural Eastern Cape for a better life at the mines, was one of the RDOs at Lonmin.

Having toiled at the mines since the early 1980s, he believed he was living on poverty wages. In the lead up to the 2014 strike, he and many others created strong linkages between their own working conditions and pay and the broader political and economic framework that left them trapped in a perpetual downward cycle. Referring to mineworkers as “slaves” he maintained that:

“We are oppressed, but it is up that dig up the platinum and precious metals. When they talk about the economy of the country, they mean the gold platinum and silver and diamonds of this rich land. But we do not see the wealth of our land at all. We want our kids to go to universities and become leaders of this country... so we must not be taken for granted because in a day they [the media] talk of billions that come out of the mines.” (Interview Zakhele, 3 November 2013)

A broader framework of systemic oppression emerged amongst mine-workers, a small pocket of whom believed it was necessary to overthrow the capitalist system.

However, it was women in the community of Marikana who would be at the coal face of the direct networks created to provide solidarity to mine-workers in Marikana. A middle-aged mother called Primrose Sonti was watching television in her shack at the time of the massacre. She had been a member of the ANC branch in her area and had consistently represented the community to press the local government councillor to deliver. On 16 August, as she saw on TV that a razor wire was being put by police around the mineworkers, she found a whistle and began to call the women of Marikana. She devised a plan: “Let’s go to the stadium near the mountain and go straight to the management to ask him to stop that thing because now our sons, our fathers are gonna die here.” Following the massacre, Primrose Sonti and other women formed the *Sikhala Sonke* (“we are crying together”) which created a network, and discourse, linking the struggles of the community, especially women, to the struggles of the mineworkers.

During the five-month-long strike, women and men who had depended upon the breadwinner salaries of the mineworkers were beginning to go hungry, but they devised plans for linking to solidarity campaigns. This was part of a process in which food was eventually delivered to 17 different

shafts in the platinum belt. Eventually, the Gift of the Givers (GOG) became involved and in merely one day alone more than 10,000 people who turned up at the site of the incoming GOG trucks received hot food or food parcels (Sinwell/Mbatha 2016: 157f.). The women of Marikana were the ‘invisible hands’ and minds who, according to Asanda Benya, “kept the strike alive” (2015: 555). Indeed, they had been experiencing a crisis of poverty and unemployment, lack of housing and water, many years before the massacre. When their husbands, friends, and neighbours took part in the strikes of 2012 and 2014, they did not sit back and wait. After this tumultuous period in the platinum belt, Sikhala Sonke consistently pressured Lonmin, and then later Sibanye Stillwater, which bought out Lonmin in 2019, to make progress not only in terms of wages, but in delivering basic services to mining communities more generally.

6. External community and trade union solidarity

A significant handful of community-based organisations in South Africa would also pledge their support directly to the mineworkers. NUMSA sought to unite the miners with workers of other sectors. In other words, the employed and unemployed instilled a sense of solidarity, momentarily, with the mining sector and specific local areas where miners were mobilising. Sipiwe Mbatha was one of the community-based leaders in a shack settlement called Thembelihle in the South-West of Johannesburg. For 20 years, Sipiwe and other community members had been demanding basic services such as water, electricity and housing from the ANC government. They too had experienced police brutality and Sipiwe himself was once shot with a potentially deadly rubber bullet which struck him in the knee (that was a year earlier in 2011).

Community leaders in Thembelihle sought to build linkages between their struggle, which he and others viewed as anti-capitalist, and the rest of the working class. When the miners of Marikana stood up, and were shot by the state for demanding a living wage, Sipiwe offered solidarity. In fact, he was present at a meeting in Magaliesburg (one hour’s drive from Marikana) when the massacre happened. He remembered that:

“We just saw this gruesome killing and it was shocking in South Africa because we were under a democracy. We couldn’t believe that this was happening in our country. So we wanted to see, is this really happening? [At that time] we were in the political school at Magaliesburg with the Democratic Left Front so they just elected us to go and see the situation.” (Interview Mbatha, 23 October 2013)

Their responsibility was to report back to those who remained behind in Magaliesburg, and then, collectively, they would decide a way forward. Although it was difficult to build networks in the context of a massive campaign of state violence, nevertheless they were persistent. On 22 August 2012, a public meeting bringing together about 150 worker and community leaders from Marikana, as well as community-based organisations, took place at the University of Johannesburg, where I was based at the time. The Marikana Support Campaign (MSC) was launched as a single-issue, education and legal campaign which demands justice for the miners killed in Marikana.

NUMSA, which was then the largest trade union in the country, the union’s members having seen what happened in Marikana, broke with the ANC and sought to build alliances with mineworkers (whom the union had previously had little success at organising). NUMSA was one of the most radical trade unions in COSATU. Founded in 1987, it has a strong tradition of shop floor organisation and education campaigns. After the massacre, the NUMSA became the largest trade union in South Africa, with approximately 350,000 members. At the end of 2013, the union made a decision to end its ongoing support for the ruling ANC. One key reason given was the assertion that the ANC had killed workers in Marikana. This set the stage for a historically monumental process which led to the union being expelled from COSATU and forming a United Front to bring together workers and community members across the country.

But the AMCU national leadership was not necessarily keen at extending solidarity through direct linkages with the working class beyond its own membership. Workers, such as Makhanya, who knew that they would be stronger with firmer links with other unions, nevertheless persisted. At a mass meeting of several thousand mineworkers at Olympia Stadium in Rustenburg (at the geographical and symbolic centre of the

three platinum mines), the great five-month strike of 2014 was about to unfold. The leaders, including Makhanya, were present, and he also spoke to the crowd. Attempting to obtain a wider and more potent reach for their collective mobilisation, Makhanya invited President Andrew Chirwa of NUMSA to speak at the rally, but he was prevented from doing so. For the AMCU executive, including its President Joseph Mathunjwa, it seemed it was either AMCU or nothing. These practices reflected a belief that while mineworkers should join and be united within the AMCU in order to fight the bosses, the AMCU should not unite with any political organisation or union. And yet Makhanya's previous experiences organising workers independently had taught him that "a worker is a worker", regardless of political affiliation, or trade, and that their strength lay in their power to unite with each other. He put it simply when he told me, "when workers come to support other workers, they must be given a chance to speak" (Personal communication Makhanya, 19 January 2014).

AMCU nevertheless took on a democratic character throughout the 2014 strike, representing militant workers that had only become more resolved since the Marikana massacre, which had taken place two years earlier. The union simply would not bow out of the strike without the consent of the rank and file. Five months into the strike, the workers and their union settled for major increases of R1,000 per year for the next three years (about 20 per cent increase per year). The five-month strike was impressive, perhaps even heroic, in the eyes of observers, who had hope that workers' agency could play a role in transforming structures that excluded the working class from a greater share in the money that their labour produces. AMCU's internal militancy amongst its members, however, was not matched by major attempts to nurture broader working-class movements during this period. While Sinwell (2016) documented the positive changes which have resulted from the wage increase, inflation severely undermined the gains (Bond 2019).

Outside South Africa, Marikana had a significant impact on left-oriented solidarity and political organisations in places such as the U.K., U.S. and Canada, which had supported the anti-apartheid struggle, and especially the ANC. The example of Marikana gained traction amongst German activists in relation to the chemical producer BASF, but this was not part of the core programme of ordinary strikers. The Socialist Workers

Party in London was perhaps more directly involved than others, because a group of its sympathisers resided in Johannesburg (near Marikana) and were part of the MSC. They produced statements written in support of the mineworkers and also sought connections to strike leaders. Indeed, a line had been drawn in the sand; it was now clear that the ANC had betrayed its own people when their police gunned down 34 workers. Some of the worker leaders, initially isolated in their shafts or specific platinum mines, had in that context connected with sympathetic organisations and individuals, such as the SWP. One of the leading mineworkers at Amplats, named Makhanya, provides a case in point. In the lead up to the 2014 strike, he was especially keen to create linkages between existing struggles internationally within an anti-capitalist orientation. By January he had attended Socialist Workers Party annual conferences in Britain on more than one occasion, and he was not only schooled in working class politics, based on his experience with the mineworkers' movement, but he was also a self-proclaimed Marxist. In London, he was met with applause by the international audience when he exclaimed "I am not just only the mineworker, I am the socialist, I am the freedom fighter." The struggle was no longer simply about individuals or solely about narrow economic concerns, but rather became symbolically about justice and the well-being of present and future generations:

"As the youngest mineworkers that have worked in South Africa, we have seen our father, our grandfather, even ourselves, working on the mines and becoming poor. We said, 'we are the last generation who are going to become poor in South Africa.' Our previous strike which took place [in 2012]... opened our minds to realise we have the power to demand everything... So we said in our next [national] election [in 2014] we want to vote out this capitalist [ANC] government." (Speech Makhanya, 22 August 2013)

7. Conclusion

What began as a narrow struggle around wages amongst one group of mineworkers, RDOs, in the shafts, spread to other categories of workers, to the broader community – especially women – and then to the plat-

inum sector in South Africa more generally. Workers themselves took the initiative to mobilise in small numbers: first two workers in the changing rooms, and then dozens of workers, before mobilising an entire category of workers (RDOs) at one shaft. When management's response to their wage demand suggested that their own local or 'narrow' issue could not be considered on its own at one shaft, RDOs called the other shafts at the company before uniting with virtually every category of the entire underground workforce. Miners then united (two years later) in the longest strike in South African mining history, under the auspices of AMCU. But the scale of organising reached other industries and communities in South Africa which had been marginalised by the state and could identify with the police brutality associated with Marikana.

The largest trade union in the country, NUMSA, broke with the COSATU federation, in part as a result of the Marikana massacre, and is now a core part of a new left alliance, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), launched in April 2017. This relatively new workers' organisation consists of over 700,000 members in over 20 different unions, including the massive 350,000-strong NUMSA, but it has yet to prove that it is democratically driven by its membership. Most recently, it has experienced a leadership crisis. It has also failed to demonstrate that it will play a serious role in organising precarious workers who operate outside traditional union structures, and it has had very limited success in uniting community struggles such as those in Thembelihle, who joined in solidarity with the miners of Marikana. The same may be said for the United Front, which has, since NUMSA's announcement of its formation in late 2013, at best stalled and at worst become moribund. There is arguably a growing degree of working-class fragmentation in the country (see e.g. Kenny 2020).

The EFF's Julius Malema, and AMCU's president, Joseph Mathunjwa, have been most effective at tapping into the political space opened up by state repression (which mineworkers link to the ANC) and the perceived limitations of the NUM. Primrose Sonti, a key leader of the women's organisation, Sikhala Sonke, is now a member of parliament in the EFF, which suggests that there is a firm relationship between local level mobilisation in Marikana and electoral politics on a national level. And yet there are few, if any, signs that the EFF is playing a major role in the popular

mobilisation of mineworkers, other than through the building of electoral support. Moreover, according to my ongoing research into the nature of AMCU in the platinum belt since the 2014 strike, the union has not developed a programme for building democratic worker structures at the shaft level that are driven by and accountable to the rank and file. Once considered to be a democratic union, AMCU is in fact proving to be deeply authoritarian.

Nor is there any substantial evidence that AMCU, much like the vast majority of unions in the country, made any substantial attempt to extend beyond their relatively narrow boundaries by bringing together workers, communities and students under the United Front. SAFTU has also not obtained enthusiastic support from AMCU, thus suggesting that the new federation remains somewhat fragmented in its attempts to incorporate all the largest and most militant trade unions in the country. AMCU's top-down nature may also, in the relatively near future, lead to its own demise in a context where intra and inter-union rivalry means that workers within the mines are no longer organised as workers, but rather on the basis of trade union membership.

Firms have sought to create the conditions for their monopolisation of labour power. By making decisions on individual shop floors, or in this case at shafts within one company, other workers with similar issues toiling in other 'spatial geographies' are relatively isolated. Indeed, this can be seen as part of a 'divide and rule strategy' to reduce "labour's bargaining powers and makes it easier to exploit the locational rigidity of workforces" (Merk 2009: 603). And yet, "spatial strategies are by no means exclusive to firms" (Merk 2009: 600). The case of platinum mineworkers' mobilisation between 2012 and 2014 enables one to explore the ways in which "workers not only scale up their activities/strategies geographically in order to influence, challenge or resist capital, but [they] also expand the terrain of struggle outside the work-floor" (Merk 2009: 606). It also points to the limitations of a 'labour' movement which has tended to remain confined, with few exceptions, to one sector (platinum) at the point of production. A further limitation on the scale of organising is that it has tended to obscure the purchasers of platinum such as BASF in Germany. While other scales were invaluable in the exercise of labour power, the transnational scale of organising was not something workers used sufficiently to their advantage.

Still, the struggle at Karee shaft, in Marikana, for a living wage of R12,500 took on an “extra-local dimension” which enabled “labour solidarity across space” (Merk 2009: 600) and thereby the exercise of substantial symbolic and real power by workers over the labour process. Whether or not transnational activism and solidarity are able to find resonance amongst ordinary people at the forefront of militancy in South Africa is likely to remain a key factor in determining the extent to which existing struggles are able to constitute a sustained threat against the logic of capital.

1 Lonmin was acquired by Sibanye-Stillwater in July 2019.

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*ABSTRACT Zwischen 2012 und 2014 kam es in Südafrika zu einer bislang beispiellosen Mobilisierung von Arbeiter*innen, die in einem fünfmonatigen Streik bei den damals drei größten Platin-Bergbauunternehmen der Welt gipfelte. Auf der Grundlage von ethnografischen Untersuchungen und Interviews zeichnet der Artikel die verschiedenen räumlichen Ebenen (scales) nach, auf denen sich Bergarbeiter*innen kollektiv organisierten und eine Einheitsbewegung jenseits traditioneller Gewerkschaftszugehörigkeiten formten. Was als Forderung nach „existenzsichernden Löhnen“ bei einer kleinen Gruppe von Arbeiter*innen eines Bergwerks begann, breitete sich bald auf die gesamte Branche aus und eroberte die Herzen und Köpfe von 80.000 Platin-Bergarbeiter*innen. Die Fähigkeit der Bergarbeiter*innen, Macht auszuüben, ist auf ihre Entscheidung zurückzuführen, bestehende Grenzen zu verschieben und – teilweise über die Landesgrenzen hinweg – Brücken zu anderen Unternehmen und Regionen zu schlagen. Der Artikel beschreibt Formen der Solidarität in den Gemeinden, insbesondere von Frauen, und in der breiteren Gewerkschaftsbewegung. Abschließend geht der Beitrag auf die Zersplitterung der Arbeiterklasse in Südafrika im Allgemeinen ein. Trotz der umfangreichen Mobilisierung war die Macht der Bergarbeiter*innen, von wenigen wichtigen Ausnahmen abgesehen, relativ begrenzt und blieb auf die lokale Ebene beschränkt.*

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