

What Went Wrong At Marikana? by Alex Lichtenstein

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If the truth be told it is shareholders in London and elsewhere that are to blame. Profits are being made at the expense of workers and communities and with the help of political patronage.

— The Bench Marks Foundation, August 18, 2012

LONMIN PLC, HEADQUARTERED IN LONDON just steps from Buckingham Palace, is the third largest producer of platinum in the world, but it has only recently entered the global news stream beyond the financial and investment pages. The platinum giant's unsought notoriety came when South African police massacred 34 striking miners at its Marikana mines last month.

As is usually the case when a state unleashes such brutality against a civilian populace, reporters rushed to the scene to try to determine what happened, and South African president Jacob Zuma quickly cobbled together a government Commission of Inquiry. Until the Commission releases its report — and in all likelihood, afterwards as well — it will be difficult to determine with any exactitude the dynamics of a mass police killing all too reminiscent of the bad old days of apartheid. Were the miners armed, and did they attack first? Were they driven on by the false promises of sangomas (traditional healers and practitioners of witchcraft) and an “upstart” union, as police spokesmen have implied? Or were the police poorly trained, and panicked? Perhaps, as some journalists have charged, the massacre was a pre-mediated murder of miners in retaliation for the killing of two policemen a few days prior? Did the violence stem from a conflict between miners and their multinational employer, or between rival mine unions?

It may be a while before we receive definitive answers to these questions. Meanwhile, however, in the understandable frenzy to sort through the horrific events of August 16th at Marikana, the deep background of the strike and massacre has largely been ignored. But violent conflicts do not occur out of thin air. The conditions on the platinum mines of Marikana, against which striking miners protested, reflect a disturbing confluence of international capital flows masquerading as socially responsible investment, neo-liberal claims to stimulate economic growth through private ventures in developing economies, and the impact of the mining industry on local communities like the impoverished North West

Province of South Africa, where Lonmin's mines are located. A quick glance at the historical record suggests that the social conflict and violent confrontation at Marikana was an entirely predictable consequence of the political economy of post-apartheid S...

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