

Workers' Rights in South Africa: Does the Ruling ANC Party Represent the People?

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Global Research, December 27, 2012

StopImperialism.com

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

This week's elective conference of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa highlighted what has become an ever more apparent and painful reality to working people in that country and political observers around the world – the revolution of 1994 effected little more than cosmetic change. The ruling class in South Africa, though fronted by black faces, continues to work in the service of Western finance capital and the neoliberal agenda, lining their own pockets while the streets, mines, and slums ring with the cries of the workers and the poor demanding justice.

As the ANC [convenes in Mangaung \[i\]](#) to chart its economic policy and lay out its vision for the future of South Africa, there remains the most important question: does the ruling party actually represent the people? If their conduct this past summer in regards to the [Marikana massacre\[ii\]](#) is any indication, the answer is a resounding NO! In fact, every decision taken by the ANC has furthered the interests of the financiers and capitalists who continue to exploit the natural and human resources of the country. For example, the issues of mine nationalization, workers' rights, unemployment etc. all demonstrate the ANC's unwavering support for the Washington consensus.

This, coupled with the recent political resurrection of Cyril Ramaphosa, one of the principle exploiters and intermediaries between the political ruling class and the international financiers, demonstrates unequivocally South Africa's descent into the quagmire of neoliberalism.

ANC and the Economic Policy Prescription

One of the central economic questions in South Africa has been, and continues to be, the issue of the mines and their nationalization. The natural resources of the country, the principle reason for their colonization in the first place, have been part of the allure of the country for investors. However, the nationalization of these resources has also been one of the central demands of the workers, particularly the mineworkers, for years.

The core of the conflict is between the workers, who labor and toil deep inside those mines for little pay and the international business interests which own the mines, who try to prevent any form of nationalization at all costs. The ANC, the elected body which claims to represent the people of South Africa, [took the position this week that\[iii\]](#), "Mine nationalization is off the agenda." Instead, the ANC leadership, composed of a black ruling class that has more in common with international capitalists than it does with black mineworkers, has proposed a series of so-called "reforms" which do little to undermine the fundamentally exploitative business arrangement that exists – a perpetuation of the status

quo. One of the most insidious of these so-called reforms is the call for the creation of a state-owned mining company which will partner with private capital in mining ventures. This utterly transparent attempt to further entrench the ruling class and enrich themselves without harming the co-conspirators around the world can only be seen as a further betrayal of the workers by the ANC.

Aside from mine nationalization, the political ruling class has outlined an openly pro-financier monetary and fiscal policy. Focusing on deficits as the centerpiece of the fiscal policy is directly in line with the Washington consensus which, as we see playing out in the headlines in the US daily, does nothing for the people while providing huge benefits for the wealthy, the only group for whom deficits are ever really an issue. As for monetary policy, here the ANC again shows its utter contempt for the working people of South Africa, championing inflation targets over employment and growth. If one needed any further evidence as to the collaboration between the political elite and their partners in business, one can simply look at the open letter recently issued by thirty of the most prominent business leaders, urging the ANC to adopt this exact policy. Once again, it seems that the interests of the ANC and the capitalist exploiters are aligned, while those of the working class and the poor are ignored. President Zuma has given the green light to this program, going so far as to warn that there must not be any deviation from this course: an obvious reference to the iron fist with which his government has beaten down the labor uprisings throughout the country.

The ruling ANC party claims that they will attempt to force corporations, which have enriched themselves on the backs of the workers, to reinvest some of their profits in order to generate economic growth. However, as usual, the party provides no clear plan as to how they would actually do this. Instead, this is another mere platitude by the ANC to placate an understandably upset people. It should be noted that, under ANC leadership, “Businesses in South Africa have effectively been on an investment strike for some time. South African corporate savings are at a multi-decade high. The sector was sitting on roughly R520-billion in mid-2012 – the highest levels since 1995.”[\[iv\]](#) In other words, the financiers and corporate oligarchs have been making record profits without actually spurring any real economic growth and, in fact, have been doing better than at any point since the end of apartheid. This means then that, despite the revolution of 1994, there has been no tangible and permanent economic progress for the mass of South Africans.

Glorifying Traitors, Silencing Dissent

No single figure more clearly symbolizes the moral and ethical bankruptcy of the ruling establishment in South Africa than does Cyril Ramaphosa, the newly appointed deputy to President Zuma. Ramaphosa not only is a corporate oligarch himself, he has shown utter disdain for the plight of mineworkers at Marikana and elsewhere. In fact, Ramaphosa [referred to the courageous strikers at Marikana](#) as “criminals” and urged “concomitant action” to be taken.[\[v\]](#) In other words, Ramaphosa urged his fellow collaborators in positions of power to crack down on the Marikana workers and, in a very direct way, contributed to the circumstances that led to the massacre. However, in examining Ramaphosa and his clear allegiance to corporate interests, we must remember that he is no less than a traitor to the labor movement and the cause of social justice in South Africa.

Ramaphosa was seen as one of the heirs-apparent to Mandela in the wake of the 1994 revolution, having founded the National Union of Mineworkers. However, for a number of

political reasons including conflict with former president Thabo Mbeki, he left the movement to establish a powerful and far reaching corporate empire. In so doing, he aligned himself with those same forces which, just a few years earlier, had been supporting the racist apartheid regime. Moreover, he became the exploiter of workers rather than the “crusader” his reputation would have had you believe. Now, this same traitor to the cause of the working class and social justice is going to be in charge of shaping the economic destiny of the country. This is, to say the least, a sad state of affairs.

As one examines those insidious figures that have risen to prominence within the ANC, one must also focus on those true leaders who have been purged. In this context, none is more important than Julius Malema, former head of the ANC Youth League. Malema, recently expelled from the ANC on dubious charges, had been one of the most vociferous voices of dissent within the ANC, always standing up publicly for the working class and the poor in South Africa and throughout the region. As [a recent article](#) from the Mail & Guardian explains:

Malema was originally found guilty by the national disciplinary committee of sowing divisions within the ruling party in November last year and was sentenced to a five-year suspension by the ANC. He was found to have unfavourably compared the leadership style of President Jacob Zuma to that of former president Thabo Mbeki, and made remarks about bringing regime change in Botswana. His suspension was turned into an expulsion after Malema appealed the sentence and the NDCA granted the young firebrand and the ANC the opportunity to argue in mitigation of the original sentence.[\[vi\]](#)

This attack on free speech within the ruling party is more than just a simple attempt to silence Malema. Instead, this was an orchestrated purge of him and a few others who represent a new generation of leaders whose allegiance is to the people and social justice, not to national and international business interests. It should also be noted that one of Malema’s cardinal sins was speaking favorably of President Mugabe of Zimbabwe and the ZANU-PF party with regard to land expropriations, advocating for similar programs in South Africa, along with his condemnation of Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC-T party, widely understood to be the darlings of the imperial powers. Naturally, this sort of truth-telling is dangerous to the ruling establishment of the ANC and necessitated decisive action to get rid of Malema and his circle.

Sleeping with the Enemy

If the systematic oppression and repression of the workers and the poor were only the work of the ANC, perhaps it would be easier to mount effective resistance. However, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has effectively transformed itself into a collaborator in this injustice. As political author William Gumede [points out](#):

[COSATU] has to deal with the perception that there is a deep divide between union members and leaders, who are seen as the new elite, while the rank and file, grassroots members are struggling...There is the feeling that the alliance is not giving them as much as they are putting into it... The alliance for many ordinary members doesn’t offer much protection or deliver material benefits.[\[vii\]](#)

The inescapable fact that Gumede and others have pointed out is that COSATU has transformed itself into the political elite of the labor movement, contenting itself with trying

to influence elections and the ANC, thereby allowing the ruling class to continue their exploitation of the workers. In fact, it is this form of collaboration, along with the continued institutionalized white privilege, which has created what lawyer, lecturer, and activist [Tshepo Madlingozi has referred to](#) as “class apartheid”.^[viii] This is a critical point because, as we examine the legacy of the post-apartheid rule of the ANC, we must critique it based on the reality of life for the people, not the ascension of a select few.

The mineworkers’ strikes at Marikana and elsewhere demonstrate clearly the discontent of the workers at their supposed labor representatives. The wildcat strike, unsanctioned by the National Union of Mineworkers, itself an affiliate of COSATU, was led by what can be called a dissident union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). This breakaway faction led by workers shows the power, but also the danger, of challenging the status quo in South Africa. Moreover, it shows the degree to which COSATU is in bed with the ANC and the ruling class in South Africa.

The uprising of organized labor in South Africa is merely a product of the corruption, ineptitude, and betrayal of the ANC and the ruling establishment. Instead of representing the people and propelling the country in a progressive direction, away from the horrific legacy of apartheid and toward a prosperous future for all South Africans, the ANC leadership and its collaborators have shown themselves to be traitors to the cause of social justice and freedom which, at one time, the ANC symbolized. By pushing a neoliberal economic agenda while simultaneously silencing dissent and suppressing worker uprisings, the ANC has discredited itself. It is now time that the voice of the people, not just the elite few, finally be heard.

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Notes

[i]

<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-19-mine-nationalisation-off-the-agenda-as-anc-appeases-businesses>

[ii] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marikana_miner_strike

[iii]

<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-19-mine-nationalisation-off-the-agenda-as-anc-appeases-businesses>

[iv] Ibid.

[v] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/20/cyril-ramaphosa-return-nelson-mandela>

[vi] <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-19-00-mangaung-conference-keeps-malema-out>

[vii] <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/marikana-should-be-warning-to-cosatu-1.1383928>

[viii]

<http://www.blackagendareport.com/content/100-years-anc-liberation-movement-state-power-south-africa>

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