

Membership-Leadership Conflict within a Trade Union on a South African Gold Mine: A Worker Perspective and Reflection on Marikana

by *Sizwe Timothy Phakathi*

Worker agency – the idea that workers are active, creative and resilient reactors to capitalist and managerially defined work structures – is a fundamental part of the sociology of work and organisational psychology. Labour process studies have shown the significance of individual and collective human agency in capitalist production systems. The ability of workers to socially organise work in ways that make sense to them long manifested itself during the scientific management movement despite Taylorism's failure to recognise the worker as a significant social actor within the workplace – the notion that was reasserted by the human relations movement theory.

Worker agency proved instrumental for workers in fighting racially repressive labour practices in colonial and apartheid mining workplace regimes. The agency of underground workers to resist the despotic management system was a boon to the formation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the 1980s. In reflecting on the views of the NUM rank-and-file members solicited in a South African gold mine long before the eruption of the Marikana tragedy, this article seeks to pose a question: if workers can exercise their agency to restrict or expand output at the point of production, can they use their agency to withdraw or extend their union membership? The article seeks to highlight that membership-leadership conflict within the NUM was brewing in the gold mines long before the Marikana tragedy in the Rustenburg platinum belt.

One of the highlights of the Marikana tragedy is that the rank-and-file workers are not only critical of management motives but can also question the motives of the trade union leaders. Workers can be critical of their unions in that "the first and overriding responsibility of all trade unions is to the welfare of their own members ... A union collects its members' contributions and demands their loyalty specifically for the purpose of protecting their interests as they see them, not their true or best interests as defined by others."ⁱ

Much has been said about the role of the South African trade union movement in the restructuring of work and transition to democracy. However, not much is known about the perceptions of unionised workers on the manner in which their trade union leaders deal with various aspects relating to conditions of employment. The South African trade union leaders' obsession with tripartite politics has rendered union leadership ineffective in dealing with the changing membership,

meeting the expectations of their members and managing the heightened political awareness of the rank-and-file members.ⁱⁱ

The Marikana tragedy did not only highlight the conflict between workers and the mine owners and managers but conflict within unions themselves and their rank-and-file members. Drawing from a six-month ethnographic research at AngloGold Ashanti's Great Nologwa mine (formerly called Vaal Reefs Number 8 Shaft) in 2007, I would like to argue that at shaft level, the "writing was on the wall" that there was dissatisfaction with the leadership of the NUM. I seek to present the views of the rank-and-file members of the NUM, which pointed to dissatisfaction with the ability of the NUM to service its members long before Marikana and the strikes that plagued the South African mining industry in the second half of 2012. In line with Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout'sⁱⁱⁱ (2008) research findings, this research revealed the NUM leadership was out of touch with its members. The post-Marikana wildcat strikes and growing membership of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) on the gold mines demonstrate that the origins of Marikana need not be confined to the Rustenburg platinum belt.

Hemingway^{iv} (1976:17-26) identifies four issues over which union leaders and members tend to clash. These include *a) employment conditions, b) union organisation, c) external affiliations and d) procedural issues.*

First, conflict over issues of employment conditions relates, amongst others, to aspects of working conditions such as number of working hours, holidays, safety, manning levels, redundancy and closed-shop policies. NUM shaft stewards have struggled to engage with management in areas pertaining to employment conditions. I observed and discovered that poor communication between shaft stewards and union members contributed to the perceived unfairness of the production bonus system by underground work teams. As one union member commented after a mass union meeting organised by NUM shaft stewards in the mine hostel:

We told the union [*shaft stewards*] that we do not like this type of production bonus. However, we found ourselves using the new production bonus system, having not approved it.

Second, conflict on issues of union organisation occurs in areas such as the internal finances of the union, the union's rules, the treatment of different members within the union and their organisational position. Workers alleged certain shaft stewards tended to solicit bribes to facilitate the employment of new employees as well as promotion for underground miners. The allegation of bribery was not an isolated case to the gold mine studied as Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout (2008) discovered in their study of NUM shaft stewards. They call this tendency of NUM shaft stewards to sell jobs in the form of bribes the *entrepreneurial union representative*. This bribery was also practised by a number of mine officials, especially senior administrative staff. A stope worker remarked as follows:

For your things to go well you have to bribe the people in charge. The APOs [assistant personnel officers] are hampering our promotion and career development. They hold and hide information. They only do favours for their friends. They want to be bribed. I do not know whether this bribery thing [*itshontsho*] is what they are instructed to do or trained for.^v

Third, conflict on issues of external affiliations erupts when members or leaders take certain actions because of their political allegiances and beliefs. At shaft level, union members blamed the NUM leadership for tribalism. As one mineworker from Lesotho commented:

It [union representatives] distinguishes between Xhosas and Basothos ... So we told them that we [members] think that the union now serves Xhosas. So it is better that we leave [or quit] the union. We also have money [membership fee] deducted [from our salary] at the end of the month.

At the gold mine studied, the rank-and-file members from countries such as Lesotho and Swaziland blamed the shaft steward leadership for being dominated by Xhosas. Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout (2008) have also noted tribalism as one of the factors that have fuelled factionalism within the union.

Fourth, conflict over procedural issues relates to the manner in which union decisions or actions are made or carried out. Mass union meetings tended to be chaotic and demonstrated lack of faith in shaft steward leadership. There were numerous instances where the rank-and-file members were not happy with the manner in which the union representatives conveyed their grievances and took decisions with management. As one member commented:

There are problems here with the union [NUM]. When they come to us, they come with decisions already made. They just come to tell us. Whether we agree or not, it does not matter. They have already made [the] decisions ... When we follow this thing through, the manager would say the union has signed. So when we ask them they would say they do not know anything. They [shaft stewards] no longer serve us well. Recently it [union] is divided ... generally we are dissatisfied with it. The union

is supposed to be your lawyer, but you would find that they [shaft stewards] just go to listen [to] what the management says.

Taking the voice of the rank-and-file worker seriously

The Marikana tragedy was a culmination of a series of unheard mineworker voices. The gap between members and their leaders had been widening not only in the Rustenburg platinum belt but also in other sectors such as the gold mines. The formation of the Workers' Committee outside union structures and directly controlled by the workers at Marikana and elsewhere in the platinum belt highlights the extent to which the post-apartheid unionised mineworkers are critical of their union leaders. The increasing membership of AMCU is a litmus test that the NUM has long been under the scrutiny. In February 2013, it was reported that the NUM had lost more than 30000 members of more than 90000 members in the Rustenburg platinum belt.^{vi} The Marikana tragedy calls attention to closing the gap between workers, their trade union and mine management. Trade unions representing the interests of workers need not be perceived to be betraying their constituencies. Such trade unions have an important role to play in improving the quality of service to their constituencies. Honest leadership, engagement and education of their members on various aspects of the mining business will be critical to resolving the labour relations crisis that has plagued the mining industry since the Marikana tragedy.

- i Flanders, A. (1970). *Management and Unions: The Theory and Reform of Industrial Relations*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 40.
- ii Buhlungu, S. and Tshoaedi, M. (2012). A Contested Legacy: Organisational and Political Challenges Facing COSATU. In *COSATU's Contested Legacy: South African Trade Unions in the Second Decade of Democracy*, edited by S. Buhlungu and M. Tshoaedi. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- iii Buhlungu, S. and Bezuidenhout, A. (2008). Union Solidarity under Stress: The Case of the National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa. *Labour Studies Journal*, 33(2):262-287.
- iv Hemingway, J. (1976). Conflict in Unions: A Study of the Social Processes of Membership-Leadership Conflict within Trade Unions. D.Phil Thesis, Nuffield College, University of Oxford.
- v While conducting this research I temporarily joined the mine as an ethnographer posing as a new mine employee. The nurse who conducted my underground medical examination solicited a bribe from me to ensure that I pass the test as he thought that I was indeed a new employee who was not aware of mine procedures.
- vi The *Star* (2013). NUM Battling to Reclaim Members due to Alleged Coercion, 22 February.

Sizwe Timothy Phakathi obtained his PhD from the University of Oxford. His doctoral research investigated worker responses to work re-organisation in a deep-level gold mining workplace. In 2010, Sizwe won the first annual Oxford University's Ngo Future of Work (FOW) Prize for his PhD research paper entitled: Getting on and getting by: The gold miners' informal work practice of making a plan (planisa).