

The Politics of Representation in Marikana: A tale of competing ideologies

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On 16 August 2012, South African police opened fire on striking mineworkers at the Lonmin Platinum Mine at Marikana near Rustenburg in the North West province of South Africa, killing 34 workers. The Marikana massacre has been seen by many as signalling a turning point in South African politics. The mineworkers were shot after they had occupied a mountain near the mine and embarked on a 'wildcat strike' for a living wage of R12 500. Early media reports presented the strike as inter-union rivalry between the relative newcomer, Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), and the older government-aligned National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). However, journalists and academics later found that the mineworkers had organised themselves and most were still members of the NUM at the time.

It was also later revealed that several days before the massacre, around 10 August, the mineworkers had collectively approached the mine management, seeking a wage increase and bypassing the union bargaining structure. They were turned away by management, who told them to approach their union. They did so the next day, with fewer people. When they approached the offices of the NUM at Lonmin, two NUM officials opened fire on their own members and, many believed, killed two people.¹ Thereafter, the miners armed themselves with pangas, knobkerries and sticks, and moved to occupy a nearby mountain. On 12 August, they again tried