

A protest not yet understood

The massacre of 34 striking mineworkers at Marikana in 2012 demonstrates how far we have yet to go in our decolonisation process, writes Camalita Naicker

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On August 16 2012, police opened fire on striking mineworkers at the Lonmin platinum mine at Marikana, near Rustenburg in North West, killing 34 people. The workers were shot after they occupied a koppie 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, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu), and the older government-aligned National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Yet journalists and academics later found that the mineworkers had organised themselves and most were still members of the NUM at the time. On the mountain the mineworkers elected their own representatives, the “five madoda”, and communed together, demanding that their bosses come to hear their grievances and rejecting the representation of their union.

In the weeks following the massacre, the media took up the conversation at the Farlam commission of inquiry with fervour. They focused on the traditional weapons the mineworkers used, the blankets they wrapped themselves in, and the fact that they used muthi, which, it was argued, made them “aggressive”. There were hardly any reports based on journalists speaking directly to the workers. The message seemed to be that these were violent, muthicrazed rural traditionalists trying to ruin “hard-won” collective bargaining structures.

Only a few journalists, mostly outside the mainstream media, took the workers’ voices seriously and it was they who discovered the second killing site at Marikana.

The mainstream media reprinted, uncritically, what was being foregrounded in the commission proceedings. The commission was used to explain police violence as “unfortunate” but “necessary”. In doing so, it subverted the political demands of the mineworkers.

By refusing the demands, Lonmin, the NUM and the government reinforced the idea, well established in the public sphere today, that political demands will only be taken seriously if presented through a recognised institutional representative body.

That the NUM was intent on framing the strikes as part of a “third force” in the form of Amcu trying to steal members from the NUM shows how the idea that the workers could organise themselves efficiently without a union was not even considered.

By using these “rural” features as justification, the government revealed to us, as citizens, who is able to be killed and what can be used as a justification for violence.

In academia, many sympathetic writers saw the strikes at Marikana as a new hope for socialism, and a new trade union insurgency. The events at Marikana were “cleaned up”. The academics were intent on foregrounding how “urban” and “progressive” the workers were. The workers appear, in these writings, to be without culture, without history, without aesthetics that signify anything particular or political. Instead, the strikers are abstracted into the figure of the “universal worker” that continues to stimulate some Marxist imaginations. Whatever the intention, they too re-inscribed the idea that only trade unions and institutional bodies could be an appropriate vehicle for political demands.

Yet, if we look closely at these features, not as excessive, dangerous or menacing but as markers of difference, we will be forced to reckon with what that difference signified. For example, as members of the NUM, surely all the men on the mountain must have had union T-shirts; they could have chosen a variety of ways to present themselves, why did they choose to appear as they did? If we take seriously the workers’ self-presentation it may lead us to echoes of other historical events, organisations and struggles that don’t fit neatly within nationalist or socialist imaginations.

One example is the Mpondo revolts of the 1960s, in which rural dwellers revolted against corrupt chiefs, met on mountains and organised alternative networks of governance that came to be called mountain committees or iKhongo.

Their revolts, too, led to a massacre, at Ngquza mountain in 1960. The mountain was seen not only as a place of refuge and a good lookout point, but also as a sacred and religious space, exclusively for men, to communicate with the ancestors

and gods and perform prayers sometimes involving muthi, especially during times of war.

The strikes at Marikana were about a living wage, but these markers of difference lead us not only to other political forms but to other political demands. One of them is that Lonmin is on land owned by the Tswana traditional authority. Whenever mineworkers and their families who now live in Nkaneng, the shack settlement below the mountain, approach the mine and local authority for proper housing, they are told that the land is not for them and that they have land in the Eastern Cape. In other words, ethnic differences and the idea that Xhosa people actually “belong” in the Eastern Cape, and are temporary labourers at the mine, continue to deny them a space at Marikana, regardless of how long they have lived and worked there.

Marikana shows us how far we have yet to go in our decolonisation process, not merely to dismantle corrupt forms of governance and ownership, but to expand our definitions of politics and the forms in which it should appear. In a country where popular protests happen every day and are seen by many in the state and society to be irrational outbursts of violence, or where Helen Zille calls residents of Cape Town shack settlements refugees from the Eastern Cape, we have to think seriously about who is seen as a citizen, and how we are able to make political demands.

We have to think seriously about how we are able to make political demands
Naicker is a lecturer in the historical studies department, University of Cape Town. This article is drawn from the chapter, *The Politics of Representation in Marikana*, in *Babel Unbound: Rage, reason and rethinking public life*. Edited by Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton. Published by Wits University Press (2020)