

Workers and Socialist Party: forged in the furnace of Marikana

'...a power (is) building in the land over which the majority black establishment (of which the NUM and the ruling African National Congress and the union umbrella Cosatu are leaders) have no influence, and which itself has little or no respect for the powers that be' – *Business Day*, 2012/08/17



WASP
Workers & Socialist Party

On December 15, 2012, twenty delegates representing the strike committees and dismissed workers committees of six different mines, from the provinces of Limpopo, the North West and Gauteng, together with a delegation from the Democratic Socialist Movement (South Africa section of the Committee for a Workers International) founded the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP). As the ANC began a conference that ended with a significant shift to the right, the vanguard of the working class took a significant step to the left.

This historic step was the expression, on the political plane, of the most significant conflict between the classes since 1994 – the virtual uprising that raged across the minefields of SA over the second half of 2012. In the worst atrocity since the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, 34 men were mowed down in cold blood by the police of a democratically elected government.

The Marikana massacre and its aftermath brought about a profound change in consciousness amongst mineworkers and within the rest of the working class. The dim outline of the conclusions that had been drawn from the experience of nineteen years of parliamentary democracy was brought into sharp focus by this one event on the afternoon of August 16, 2012. What it clarified was the role of the ANC government, the police, the prosecuting authorities, the mining bosses and the trade unions.

Over the past nineteen years, the working class has registered the deterioration of social conditions. Mass unemployment stands at between six and eight million people, the greatest burden – at 70% – being borne by those aged 18 to 34. The education system is in perpetual crisis with less than half of those starting school managing to reach matric. Thousands who manage to reach the last year of schooling are unable to go any further, obstructed by a combination of academic and financial barriers. The health system, as fundamentally class-

segregated as the rest of society, is still struggling to overcome the genocidal HIV/Aids policy of the Mbeki administration, in addition to being marred by corruption and under-spending continued from the apartheid regime. Twelve million go to bed hungry at night in the richest country on the African continent. Corruption is so rampant that more than 90% of municipalities did not get a clean audit in 2012. Alongside the deepening poverty of the masses, the capitalist elite, now including a smattering of black BEE tycoons, flaunts obscene wealth. The gulf between rich and poor is so wide that SA counts as the most unequal country on the planet. From all these facts, a gradual apprehension had set in in the minds of the masses: that the ANC did not represent them but governs the country on behalf of the rich.

Until now the discontent of the masses had taken the form, firstly, of a significant escalation of class struggle. Service delivery protests in working class communities in townships and squatter camps have become a permanent feature of the political landscape elevating SA to the position of protest capital of the world with the highest number of protests per head of population anywhere. In the tertiary education sector protests against financial and academic exclusion are now a given fixture of the academic calendar. In the workplace the number of strikes and work days lost through strike action exceeded the peak of the struggle against apartheid in 2010, and has hit new records every year since.

Secondly, the changes in consciousness have also been expressed on the political plane. In the 2004 elections, when the ANC's electoral strength took on the appearance of an unstoppable juggernaut with a massive 70% parliamentary majority, the alienation of the masses expressed itself through the fact that twelve million of the eligible voting population did not vote. Of these five mil-

lion even did not bother to register; seven million who registered, alienated from the ANC but with no other party offering any alternative, could not bring themselves to vote; protesting passively in a massive voter stay-away for a democracy so young.

The ANC's 70% parliamentary majority masked the reality that it received the vote of only 38% of the eligible voting population. This electoral bleeding continued in 2009 with the ANC losing votes in every province except KwaZulu-Natal reducing its vote to 34% and even less in the 2011 local government elections.

Marikana had the effect of changing quantity into quality. The mineworkers, assuming the role of vanguard of the working class, began the process of their political emancipation first in the workplace. They broke free from the paralysing rules of engagement in the class struggle as determined by the collective bargaining system and its institutions, overthrew and evicted the NUM from several mines and, most significantly of all, reclaimed rank-and-file control of the struggle through the establishment of independent strike committees thereby laying the groundwork for the emergence of a new worker-controlled trade union movement.

They followed this by translating the reclamation of their class independence in the workplace with the reassertion of their political independence through the establishment of a party representing their interests as workers. The passive political act of staying away from the polls is giving way to active intervention on the political plain. This is the historical signifi-

cance of the founding of the Workers and Socialist Party.

It can be said that it was as much the actions of the police, the mine bosses, the government

the trade unions and the political parties of the Tripartite Alliance as well as the opposition on the Marikana massacre that clarified the most profound political questions that had been confronting the working class over eighteen years.

The massacre was premeditated and could not have proceeded without the authorisation of the government headed by Zuma. It was preceded by discussions between Lonmin management, senior ANC leaders and government ministers, former NUM general secretaries and shareholders. Cyril Ramaphosa, concentrating all these manifestations of the ruling elite in one person, set the tone for the massacre with his denunciation of the strike as criminal and requiring 'concomitant' action.

A vicious propaganda campaign depicted the strikers as bloodthirsty thugs who had to be brought under control by weapons of war. The Commissioner of Police stated that there was no need for regret over the deaths. The fact that most of the workers were killed out of camera view, execution style, was initially covered up. Zuma refused to condemn the massacre, refused to take responsibility, refused outright to blame the police, the Minister of Police, or the bosses. The parliamentary portfolio committee on minerals and energy would not visit Marikana. The main preoccupation of the Chamber of Mines and the government was to reassure big business that the bloody repression was just a minor glitch. SA remained 'open for business.' When the uprising spread, a virtual state of emergency was declared on the minefields. The South African Communist Party (SACP) condoned the massacre ('that's what the police have guns for'), after initially condemning the strike as

led by a 'Pondoland vigilante mafia'. The Cosatu leadership after the massacre declared it was 'against thuggery' (of workers, that is). In response to its members' revolt for worker-controlled struggles, it launched a 'hands-off NUM' campaign to 'reclaim Rustenburg out of the hands of counter-revolutionaries'. They joined the capitalists in denouncing the victory of the Lonmin workers. The mineworkers were well and truly on their own.

The founding of the Workers and Socialist Party is the conclusion flowing from the lessons of the events described above. But whilst the Marikana massacre was the precipitating factor in the decision to form WASP, in fact the birth of this party is not an expression of the political conclusions of the mineworkers alone but of the entire working class. Every survey of political attitudes amongst shop stewards Cosatu has conducted in preparation for its congresses has demonstrated a growing apprehension of the class character of the ANC as a party of the capitalist class. As early as 1998, during the ANC's first term in office, 30% of shop stewards supported the formation of a mass workers party by Cosatu.

That this figure has grown from a substantial minority to a significant majority is confirmed by the suppression of the report of the latest survey conducted on Cosatu's behalf by Moeletsi Mbeki originally due to be released on the eve of Mangaung.

It confirmed what the DSM had argued since the adoption of GEAR in 1996. At this time we stepped out of the ANC where we had operated as the Marxist Workers Tendency and formed the Democratic Socialist Movement as an independent organisation. We argued that the working class were temporarily sojourners in the ANC which had diverted the struggle for their social emancipation against capitalism into the safe waters of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. We pointed out that even the most basic needs of the working class could not be met on the basis of capitalism and that to be able to solve the social problems of mass unemployment and poverty the working class would be compelled to reclaim its political independence.

In founding WASP, the mineworkers have retied the knot of history. On WASP's shoulders lies the responsibility of unifying the struggles of the working class, providing ideological clarity, strategic purpose and tactical agility and reviving the traditions of struggle, solidarity and socialism. In doing this, WASP will realise the capitalists' worst nightmare as described by Business Day the day after the Marikana massacre. WASP must fulfil the dreams of millions of workers by preparing for the overthrow of capitalism and the socialist transformation of society in SA, the continent and the world.