

# The Marikana Massacre: Five Years Later

By Alex Lichtenstein

GREG MARINOVICH  
**MURDER AT  
SMALL KOPPIE**  
THE REAL STORY OF  
SOUTH AFRICA'S MARIKANA MASSACRE



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ON THE AFTERNOON I witnessed a sparsely attended sitting of South Africa's Marikana Commission of Inquiry in November 2013, I heard the testimony of Brigadier Adriaan Calitz, one of the police commanders present at the notorious massacre of striking platinum miners on August 16, 2012. Calitz, a heavy-set, Afrikaans-speaking white man, exercised his constitutional right to testify in Afrikaans rather than English. I, along with the rest of the spectators who didn't understand Afrikaans, could follow his answers through headphones providing instantaneous translation into English or IsiXhosa. Struggling with my headset, I turned to the woman seated next to me for help. Out of curiosity, I asked her why she was attending the Commission hearings. In perfect, unaccented English she replied that she was there to hear the testimony of her husband — Brigadier Calitz.

Over the course of the Commission's 300 days of hearings, this was but one trivial example of the kind of obfuscating tactics engaged in by the state authorities as they sought to dodge any responsibility for what happened on August 16, 2012, when South African police shot and killed 34 striking platinum miners in the dust-blown community of Marikana. For the first time since the end of apartheid in 1994, the South African state had deployed massive lethal force against its own people in a collective fashion all too reminiscent of the previous, hated white-supremacist regime. What subsequently came to be called the Marikana Massacre has deeply scarred the post-apartheid social order. It simultaneously represents the unbowed power of large-scale mining capital, its enabling relationship with the deeply corrupt ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), and the inability or unwillingness of a government founded on the hopes of liberation to deliver anything resembling justice to its poorest and most exploited citizens. As a recent [report released in South Africa by the State Capacity Research Project](#) reckons, Marikana stands as one of the defining "public moments" in what has amounted to a "silent coup that has removed the ANC from its place as the primary force for transformation in society."

It is true that Marikana badly dented the ANC's legitimacy and has helped erode some of its political hegemony. Yet, despite the 30,000 pages of damning evidence amassed by the Marikana Commission of Inquiry, a searing documentary film, dozens of journalistic exposés, and a slew of books on the subject, all of which demonstrate either state responsibility or complicity in the killings, five years later many of those legally and morally answerable remain unscathed. No police officers or commanders have been held criminally responsible.

Lonmin, the platinum-producing multinational that refused to negotiate a peaceful end to the 2012 strike, still operates on the platinum belt and indeed recently secured a renewed 20-year license from the government. This renewal came despite the fact that the company fell far short of the social amelioration program it had promised under its previous mandate. Jacob Zuma, the unapologetic president of South Africa at the time of the killings, is now well into his second term, despite a scandalous record of cronyism and nepotism that might make even the Trump family blush. And Cyril Ramaphosa, a beneficiary of the Black Economic Empowerment program and the largest black shareholder in the once white-owned Lonmin, may well succeed Zuma in the presidency. Ramaphosa, at least, has recently publically apologized for his role in the events of five years ago. He's the only one who has.

Two of the most recent books about Marikana suggest that, half a decade on, there are many lessons still to be learned from the massacre and many debts still to pay. *Murder at Small Koppie*, by South African photojournalist Greg Marinovich, is perhaps the most thorough exposé to date of what actually occurred in the fateful clash between striking miners and South African police. Marinovich's detailed and stunning book — published last year by Penguin South Africa and due for release by Michigan State University Press in November — makes clear that the lack of criminal charges against the perpetrators remains a travesty of justice. The other book considered here, *The Spirit of Marikana* by University of Johannesburg researchers Luke Sinwell and Siphwe Mbatha, is more concerned with the implications of Marikana for the uncertain future of South Africa's beleaguered trade union movement and allied leftists who place their hopes in working-class militancy emanating from the bottom up. Tracing the initial strike to the formation of surreptitious "worker committees" on the platinum belt, Sinwell and Mbatha look to a renewal led by "the insurgency of the rank and file," what they see as the seeds of a new kind of workers' movement that blossomed outside of any formal trade union structures.

Marinovich, an experienced photojournalist who — as a member of the "Bang-Bang Club" — covered some of the most violent street clashes of the dying days of apartheid in the 1980s, was one of the first reporters on the scene at Marikana. He brings a photographer's eye for detail to his account of the hard life endured by the rock drill operators (RDOs), who spearheaded the strike, documenting conditions both underground and in their shack settlement of Nkaneng, near the mine. While generally sympathetic to the RDOs, whom he sees as victims of terrible state and corporate malfeasance, Marinovich does not shrink from describing their "macho subculture" and refuses to varnish the fact that "violence was an essential part of the drillers' strike." By focusing on the plight of the RDOs, Marinovich acknowledges how their grievances were forged as much by differentiation from the rest of the workers as by solidarity with them: by 2012, he notes, they "no longer commanded wages superior to those of the men who assisted them." Thus, they felt inadequately represented by the union that nominally represented them, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).

Resting on an heroic anti-apartheid record long past its sell-by date, and benefiting from a lucrative strategic alliance with the ruling ANC, the NUM has become far more adept at promoting the fortunes of its officers than at speaking for the ordinary workers doing difficult and dangerous underground work. The union is now routinely derided by workers as the "National Union of Management." Once elected, NUM leaders "escaped the bedlam underground," as Marinovich puts it, and learned to enjoy the perks of union office. Not surprisingly, they proved reluctant to return to the shop floor and clung desperately to union office. Management played on this natural desire, and miners "resent those who choose to protect their perks instead of the miners who elected them." Bypassing this undemocratic union structure, in mid-2012 RDOs at Lonmin initiated independent wage negotiations with management, only to discover that they would have to engage in a wildcat strike to enforce their maximalist demand: an increase of over 100 percent, to 12,500 rand a month, which

they regarded as a “living wage.” Although this became a rallying slogan for the miners and their supporters, it seems pretty clear in Marinovich’s telling that it was a bargaining position, not a *diktat*, as the mine owners pretended to believe. Despite the RDOs’ desperate poverty, Marinovich points out that, as skilled workers with a steady job in an economy with a shortage of well-paid work, they were in fact relatively privileged to have their treacherous jobs. Still, as migrant workers, many sustain multiple dependents on their wages, often falling victim to predatory moneylenders to make ends meet. The RDOs recognized, however, that their strategic place in the production process gave them an advantage. Without ore to smelt, the mine operations would eventually come to a halt, leaving Lonmin at their mercy. Or so they hoped.

For its part, Lonmin by 2012 had backed itself into a corner. During an earlier period of soaring platinum prices, the company had pledged itself to an ambitious social development plan in the mining district, agreeing to build 5,500 upgraded dwellings for workers. Yet increased profits went instead to shareholders and the expansion of operations, not better conditions for the labor force. When the price of platinum shrank again, it was too late. New wage demands now seemed more difficult to meet.

Regardless of the feasibility of “12,500,” as Marinovich observes, no one — not Lonmin management, and certainly not the NUM — “wanted workers airing their complaints, especially wage grievances, outside of established channels.” The unauthorized action of the RDOs thus challenged the long-term comfortable relationship between the union, management, and indeed the ANC, in the person of Lonmin’s major black shareholder and one-time militant leader of the NUM, “ruling party prince” Cyril Ramaphosa. As Marinovich points out, in the immediate days after apartheid the NUM had appeared to be “one of the left’s pathways to power.” Two decades later, however, the union had definitively cast its lots with the boardroom rather than the mineshaft. In fact, union officeholders had their “executive-level” salaries and fancy cars bankrolled by the mining houses rather than by the members whose interests they claimed to represent when they sat across the bargaining table from their true patrons. Union office also gave them access to privileged levels of power within the ANC, along with its attendant perks and cronyism. Marinovich concludes that “some of NUM’s otherwise inexplicable anti-worker actions can only be explained as those of a union serving the ANC’s political interest above that of workers.” As far as the striking workers were concerned, “NUM was working hand in glove with Lonmin to break the strike.” In Marinovich’s telling, because of his personal stake in Lonmin, Ramaphosa’s “financial interests were being threatened by the demands of the miners he once represented.” Described by Marinovich as “the most powerful arrow in Lonmin’s quiver of political influence,” Ramaphosa, in labeling the strikers’ actions as “criminal,” at the very least bore some accountability for the “gloves off” attitude embraced by the police. Only this May did Ramaphosa admit his responsibility in these events, confessing openly to parliament that he “did use inappropriate and unfortunate language” in his emails urging immediate police action against the strikers.

If Ramaphosa had inflamed the situation by characterizing strikers as criminals, others dismissed their actions as being driven by even darker forces. One of the most controversial aspects of the Lonmin strike and subsequent massacre was the place of “witchcraft” in spurring the miners to action. The miners’ resort to the ministrations of a *sangoma* — a traditional healer — to steel themselves against potential police violence was harped on by their detractors to paint them as “murderous primitives,” unable to comprehend the dynamics of a traditional labor dispute. Rather than dismissing out of hand the charges of *muti* use, Marinovich is one of the few sympathetic observers to take them seriously. But in contrast to those who rely on this to discredit the strikers, he recognizes the important role traditional medicine played both in boosting their collective morale and, not incidentally, in striking fear into the police — with serious consequences. The reliance on the *sangoma’s muti* “ritualized their demand for a wage of R12500 from a purely industrial matter to a higher

quest.”

At the same time, unlike many of the critics of the state and Lonmin, Marinovich does not downplay the murderous violence deployed by miners against their perceived enemies, including fellow workers, Lonmin security guards, and the police. In a skirmish with the police three days before the massacre, miners inflicted several casualties. No doubt, when the state’s final assault on the strikers came on August 16, many police officers sought revenge on the miners on behalf of their fallen comrades. Miners hemmed in by razor wire and police vehicles were given no warnings, instructions, or commands by the massed security forces before they opened fire with live ammunition on the trapped and helpless workers. Moreover, Marinovich speculates, police who themselves believed that miners could draw on the power provided by the *sangoma’s* treatments had itchy trigger fingers. Faced with panicked miners fleeing toward them (but not, it seems clear, charging them with the intention to attack), police unleashed a fusillade of automatic rifle fire. Seventeen miners fell mortally wounded. Scores more were badly injured.

This initial massacre represented, however, only half the number of miners killed by police on August 16. The other 17 met their deaths on the nearby “small koppie,” or hillock, to which they fled after the first police assault. Even if the first 17 deaths might be excused as a tragic accident driven by misunderstanding, confusion, and panic, the deliberate and systematic murder that followed the initial fusillade can only be seen as retribution by police against the striking miners (a story Marinovich originally broke in the SA online newspaper, *The Daily Maverick*). By the time they came across the miners hiding on the small koppie, nearly 20 minutes later, the police were hunting them down, not attempting to disperse them — a task surely already accomplished. This was payback time, it seems. There is solid forensic evidence and some eyewitness testimony, Marinovich argues, that several of the miners killed at this second site — out of the view of the media — were executed in cold blood. This series of events is quite a contrast to the “official story” advanced by police spokesmen, who claimed that at both killing sites armed miners recklessly attacked the guardians of law and order, leaving them no option but to defend themselves with lethal force. Whatever else we now know about Marikana, we know this was a lie. Indeed, in an already shocking tale of government malfeasance, perhaps one of the most stunning details revealed in Marinovich’s book is the decision made in secret to “disperse, disarm and arrest the miners,” using force of arms if need be. Drawing on material presented at the Commission of Inquiry, he makes a compelling case that such a decision was taken the night before the final showdown, and subsequently covered up by police officials at the highest levels. No one as of yet has been brought to book for these actions.

Much like Marinovich, Sinwell and Mbatha contend that the massacre was “a premediated attempt to destroy the independent working-class organization” that had developed at the mine. Sinwell and Mbatha’s book documents, through multiple interviews with workers themselves, the “micro-processes” that led to the formation of a particular set of demands and an organizing culture in the mines. In contrast to Marinovich’s forensic exposé, however, they are less interested in the dynamics of the massacre itself than they are in uncovering the hidden sources of the “independent worker committees” that posed a significant challenge to both management and what workers saw as a “pocket union” made ineffective by its collusion with the company. The unique contribution of their research is to bring to light the “radical political culture” embedded in the direct workplace democracy practiced by these committees as an alternative to formal unionism.

As they observe, the insurgent organizing grew within the space created by the divisions between the complacent NUM and the new upstart challenging it for members on the platinum belt, the Association of

Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). Unsure about which union had their interests at heart, some workers in the mines — the skilled RDOs in particular — decided to go it alone, approaching management directly with their demands. This was the spark that lit the flame that became the August 2012 massacre. As independent leftists rushed to Marikana — including, it must be said, the authors of this book — to offer solidarity to the mineworkers, the ANC and the NUM complained of “those dark forces who can mislead our members,” ignoring what Sinwell and Mbatha document as the “already existing organic capacity” of the mineworkers for self-organization. It is unlikely that the NUM or ANC recognized the irony in deploying this “agitator theory” to explain worker behavior, one of the favorite charges made by former apartheid leaders against striking workers during the 1970s and 1980s. (Similarly, the arrests and torture suffered by miners at the hands of the police in the days and weeks after the massacre, as described by Marinovich, appear disturbingly interchangeable with the behavior meted out to striking workers by the security police during the darkest days of apartheid.) There is no need to give credence to the agitator theory in this instance, but Sinwell and Mbatha do undercut their own contention by insisting on the significance of the Democratic Socialist Movement’s role in organizing opposition to NUM long before the strike. This is often a problem for the left, torn as it is between emphasizing the independent radicalism of the working class (so effectively documented in this book) and taking credit for organizing gains when they are achieved.

Politically speaking, Marikana could not have come at a worse time for the ANC, which had to protect its left flank from one of its own former firebrands, Julius Malema. By 2012, Malema had been expelled from the ANC Youth League and was casting about for a new vehicle for his populist political ambitions. As Marinovich points out, part of the dynamic at work at Marikana was the ANC’s justifiable fear that Malema might successfully exploit the situation to build his own political capital. From their perspective, ending the strike as soon as possible, without the popular Malema’s intervention, was desirable — hence the ANC’s unwillingness to let things drag out and to deploy massive force against the miners instead. This strategy backfired, to say the least. In the wake of the massacre, Malema was the first politician to meet with the miners and easily portrayed himself as their champion in the face of the corrupt ANC and its collusion with mining capital. Based in part on his role at Marikana, within a year Malema launched a new political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), bent on challenging the ANC at every turn.

Malema himself is a demagogue, and the EFF more of a populist-nationalist formation than a genuine left alternative to the ANC able to advance the interests of the working classes and the poor. Nevertheless, the party continues to serve as a disruptive anti-ANC force on the floor of parliament, in the courts, and in the streets, and now garners close to 10 percent of the national vote, mostly drawn from disgruntled former partisans of the ANC.

Marikana touched off similar turmoil and division within the South African trade union movement. Like the ANC, by 2012 the NUM had already lost much of its power to command the loyalty of the platinum miners, but Marikana was the last straw. The disillusionment with NUM, crystallized by the shots fired at marching strikers from the union’s office a few days before the massacre, prepared the ground for the full emergence of its rival in the platinum belt, the AMCU. Because of his intercession on behalf of Lonmin’s striking workers, AMCU leader Joseph Mathunjwa “was generally perceived as a leader who could potentially represent insurgent workers,” Sinwell and Mbatha write. In contrast to the boardroom bargaining practiced by the NUM, AMCU at least agreed “to engage with rank and file workers before making decisions in wage negotiations.” In the aftermath of the massacre, AMCU proved able to outmaneuver the NUM in the platinum industry, and it now represents a majority of the workers in the sector, in an ongoing turf battle with NUM for membership and dues.

Marikana also inflamed long-simmering tensions within the country's main trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), of which NUM is the largest member. Many workers in other industries shared the miners' frustration with the cozy relationship between large corporations favored by the ANC and complacent unions. Several COSATU unions, including the large and powerful National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), voiced a desire to renew the union movement by challenging COSATU and the tight reins held by the ANC. This impulse led, finally, to the launch of a new union federation in April 2017. Whether it will harness or suppress the kind of shop-floor action that Sinwell and Mbatha view as essential to labor's renewal remains to be seen.

Marinovich ends his story with the massacre and its immediate, cruel aftermath. But *The Spirit of Marikana* takes the dismaying events of August 2012 as the inaugural moment in a broader worker insurgency. Soon enough, workers at both Lonmin and its corporate rival Amplats appeared unwilling to submit to *any* union discipline and began to buck AMCU as an organization as well. At best, Sinwell and Mbatha suggest, the incorporation into AMCU of the worker committees that had touched off the labor conflict on the platinum belt in the first place was "rocky and incomplete"; at worst, Mathunjwa "considered the worker committees as a threat and therefore aimed to destroy them." Even AMCU ultimately proved unable to reconcile the understandable demands from below for worker engagement with organization and the necessity of clear lines of authority for union power to treat directly with management. While it is true that independent shop-floor organization and leadership is needed to keep union governance honest, it is also the case that it can be difficult to run a union if your shop steward and branch committee structures must constantly deal with alternative workplace factions. Moreover, such divisions, if not quelled, make it almost impossible to strike a bargain with employers that all workers have agreed to and will abide by. Nevertheless, disenchantment with Mathunjwa's apparently autocratic leadership style and millenarian Christianity soon set in among ordinary workers whose militancy derived from the kind of direct workplace democracy applauded by Sinwell and Mbatha. Before long the mocking slogan thrown at NUM — "subscription forward, then workers back" — came to be applied by miners to AMCU as well.

Yet, during the months-long platinum belt strike of 2014, Mathunjwa seemed to bend to the demand that he constantly consult with his base before responding to the offers made by the mining companies. This democratic practice allowed the workers to hold out for a 20 percent increase — far less than the initial R12,500 thrown up at Marikana but a significant wage boost nonetheless. As Sinwell and Mbatha put it, in the 2014 strike "the insurgency of the rank and file prevented [AMCU] shop stewards or branch committee office bearers from being co-opted by management." Sinwell and Mbatha do allow that even the most intransigent workers knew that eventually they would need to join a union if they were to build any kind of negotiating relationship with management over the long term. Indeed, they quote a shop-floor activist as saying "we saw the difficulties of fighting the employer when you are outside" of recognized bargaining structures. The prolonged AMCU-led miners' strike in 2014 — fully protected because it was called legally by the union — meant that workers could not be dismissed.

There is no denying the fundamental justice of the miners' cause or the unconscionable behavior of Lonmin, the NUM, and the ANC government alike. Nevertheless, Sinwell and Mbatha's rank-and-file perspective, as appealing as it may be, deserves some critical interrogation. While the "organic capacity of the working class" may be necessary to preserve union democracy and to check the tendency of organizations like NUM to become too cozy with employers and too dependent on the state, pure shop-floor militancy has its limits. This is especially true when it comes to moving from insurgency to negotiation. Workers' demands spring from a complex calculus. Some are based on both broad and immediate social needs best articulated by those who live

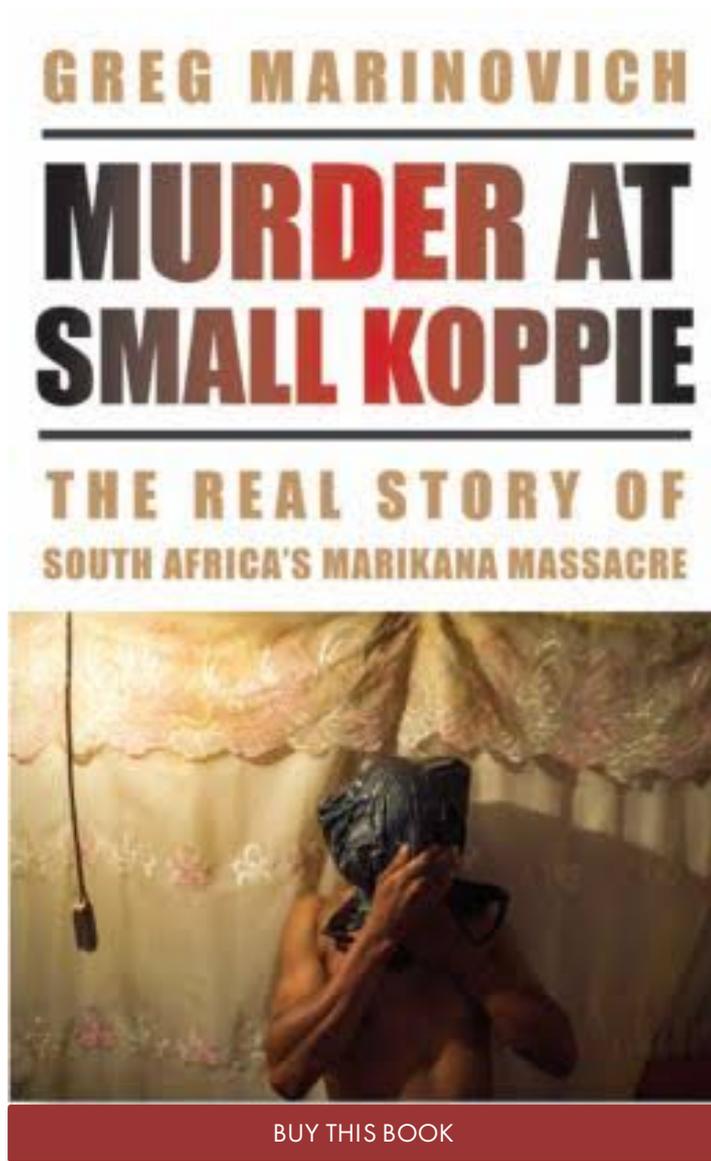
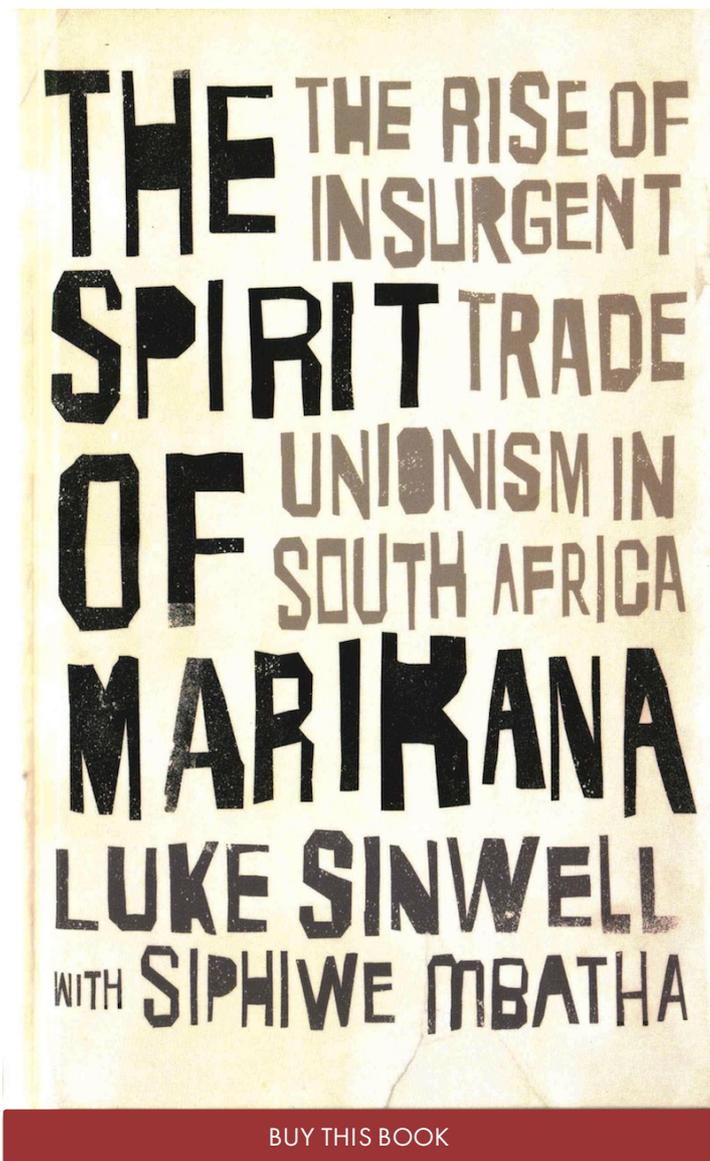
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them, while others may be driven by workplace rivalries like that between RDOs and fellow workers. Undoubtedly, large multinationals like Lonmin seek to dampen wage demands to ensure shareholder profit, to build up investment capital, and to keep its ANC cronies happy. Nevertheless, they do need to remain in business. The job of a union responsive to the shop floor is to keep the company honest by pressing workers' demands as far as they can go. At the same time, a well-run union will use its resources and knowledge to help workers recognize the limits of the possible in any particular bargaining climate. A wage demand scribbled by ordinary workers in a changing room is an excellent place to start but should not always be elevated to a negotiating position *tout court*.

Short of “all power to the Soviets,” can an “autonomous organization that did not need to report to anyone but their mass-based worker constituency” effectively represent workers' collective interests to management? Can a small group of motivated workers in a single workplace realistically do battle with a large, powerful global mining corporation and its state allies without some larger organizational backing? Moreover, some formal organization must help reconcile competing sets of demands and interests, not only between workers and management but among workers themselves. Without much comment or reflection, Sinwell and Mbatha describe the lethal violence meted out by striking workers at Lonmin to the “traitors” who, out of desperation, sought to return to work. Marinovich, perhaps less directly embedded in the communities he writes about, takes a far more clear-eyed view of the social costs of such intra-class bloodletting. A romanticized embrace of anything emanating from the shop floor rather than the union hall is not always the best way forward, even if the worthy goal is a radical redistribution of the wealth produced by exploited labor. Nevertheless, as both of these fascinating books demonstrate, South African workers certainly will not do any better waiting around for the ANC to address their plight. *As Marinovich says in a recent interview*, “The truth behind what happened at Marikana has rent a hole through our illusion of a just society, of South Africans as a lamp for the world.” It is hard to disagree.

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