

Revenge of the Commons: The Crisis in the South African Mining Industry

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By Keith Breckenridge

Most accounts of the Marikana massacre, and the resulting turmoil in the South African mining industry, stress the ongoing importance of structural poverty, and the gross inequalities of life in South Africa after the end of Apartheid. If the [writers](#) on this [subject](#) (and many other events of contemporary South African politics) are correct, little has changed. But they are not right, at least not straightforwardly. The violent protests on the mines have been prompted by very dramatic changes in the distribution of power on the mines, changes that have brought about conditions of civil war within the mines' unionised work force. And what that internecine conflict shows is that the long-term structures of political economy that supported the mines, and the distinctive features created by Apartheid South Africa, present an unexpected threat to the union movement, mining capital and the state.

The most influential [scholarly account of the making of the Apartheid state](#) was published as the first article in the new journal *Economy and Society* in 1972. In this explanation [Harold Wolpe](#) heavily emphasised the changing relationship between two distinct regional modes of production, one emerging from the mines organised by thoroughly capitalist relations of production, the other in the tribal reserves based on communally held land and production organised and controlled by families. He endorsed the argument, long made by South African scholars, that capitalist development had been subsidized by migrancy directly by cheapening the cost of labour and indirectly by transferring the burden of social reproduction on to families trapped in the tribal reserves. What was distinctive about his analysis was his claim that the communal economy in the reserves was collapsing and that the coercive apparatus of Apartheid, with its massive investment in policing, prisons and influx control, was required to maintain the return flow of migrant labourers.



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A few years later [Monica Wilson](#), the matriarch of South African liberal scholarship and author of a brilliant and withering [anthropology of Pondoland](#), the archetypal labour reserve, explained to a Johannesburg audience that the ability of rural African families to subsidize the economic development in the cities had come to its end. '[South Africa has lived on the capital of a very strong African family system,](#)' she warned, '[and that capital has been squandered](#)' (p. 18). Like Wolpe she argued that the coercive arrangements that were required to maintain the economy of migrant labour were destroying the liberal foundations of urban society and families in the countryside. The 'first aim' of a sane and responsible social policy, she argued, 'must be the settlement of families at the breadwinner's place of work.'

Since the early 1980s, social historians, especially based here at [Wits](#), have presented a somewhat different account of the political agency of migrancy. They have shown how workers invested determinedly in the increasingly impossible project of the rural homestead, opting for strategies that bolstered the chances of rural independence and taking control of institutions like chiefship, compounds and prisons that were designed to subdue them. Charles van Onselen's [biographical essay on the prison gang leader Nongoloza Mathebula](#) (requires subscription) in *History Workshop* in 1985 captured the entangled politics of this research eloquently. The scholarly picture of migrant labour is now intriguingly dialectical with the state, the largest industrial employers and millions of poor rural men heavily invested in the increasingly fictional project of rural independence from capitalism. Yet, despite the enormous field of excellent research, both the state and social scientists seem to have very significantly underestimated the politics and significance of migrancy today.

What the South African mining industry is now facing, as former unionist Gavin Hartford has recently demonstrated in [a paper that has electrified the country](#), is unmistakably an angry revolt of male migrant

labourers, quite distinct from the much larger body of urban men and women who make up the bulk of the mining work force. The workers driving the bitter disputes on the mines are almost entirely Rock Drill Operators, or, in the technical language of the mines, they are RDOs. These are the men (almost entirely) who do the miserably dangerous but indispensable work of driving the heavy pneumatic drills deep in to the quartzite rock that encases the gold and platinum. They were recruited from the traditional labour reserves of the South African mining industry, from Lesotho, Mozambique and the Eastern Cape. The most significant portion are from the Eastern Cape district of Pondoland, the region that formed the subject of Monica Wilson's *Reaction to Conquest*, and which has served as a laboratory for the social science of migrancy ever since (with excellent work by the [Mayers](#), [William Beinart](#) and [Dunbar Moodie](#)).

What is distinctive about these RDOs is their basic illiteracy which (although it has some of the virtues claimed by [James Scott](#)) traps them in to the job categories, and career trajectories, that used to be all that was available to black men on the mines. They cannot meet the academic requirements to become Miners (the skilled workers, and, not incidentally, the old job category that was reserved for whites), or any of the other skilled work positions, and they are trapped in a model of unskilled migrant labour that was first developed over a century ago. As Hartford and others show, the revolt is being led by migrants who have worked on the mines for decades, the majority of whom are in their late 40s or early 50s.

These men nurture the dream of returning to live permanently in the countryside. They have in mind a rural world that has few of the resources of the capitalist cities but many of the virtues of the precapitalist commons. The schools, hospitals, telephones and roads in Pondoland are in a state of horrible dishevelment. But the homesteads there, like the others in the tribal lands, are also free (aside from a nominal and mostly unenforced tribal levy) of the onerous costs of living in a capitalist world. There is, usually, no electricity, and hence no electricity bill. Water comes, mostly, from the sky or from the rivers. And there are no municipal rates, rentals or mortgages on property.



Landscape east of the Great Kei River, Pondoland. Image by Xufanc

Yet the reality of migrancy bears little resemblance to the life of the commons. A generation ago, migrant labourers were housed in single-sex compounds that best resembled low-security prisons. These grim institutions had the outstanding benefit of sheltering migrants from the demands of urban capitalism. They paid no rent, their food was provided by the mines and even their entertainment, such as it was, was subsidized in the compound. But the compounds did not survive the end of Apartheid. In the effort, very belatedly, to meet Monica Wilson's demand to house families near to their workers, the mines offered to subsidize local housing. But they also offered the migrants the choice of a small 'living-out allowance' in place of a housing subsidy. It was this amount, around \$200 per month, which migrants used to set up a home in one of the shanty-towns that now surround all of the mines. Typically moving in with a woman, the migrants were quickly subject to the fierce cost pressures of urban South African life. In the wake of the Marikana massacre the National Credit Regulator **raided the premises of the 13 micro-lenders** in the area, accusing the companies of encouraging workers to take on unrealistic debts, and making use of blank garnishing orders to secure repayment prior to the issue of salaries.

Here, also, lie the reasons for the migrants' murderous anger at the National Union of Mineworkers, the union that has probably done more to create the free South Africa than any other organisation or institution. NUM, at least until recently, represented a majority of workers on the platinum and gold mines. Many of those workers are in skilled positions that pay well, and which have a clear path for promotion and salary improvements. (When the RDOs demand a monthly salary after deductions of R12,500, or approximately £1,000, they have in mind the current earnings of Miners.) NUM officials have also become part of the managerial hierarchy on the mines, paying themselves well and drawing on privileges and facilities not available to unskilled workers. In the recent salary negotiations at both Impala Platinum and Lonmin, managers, aware of the growing gap between skilled and unskilled union members, attempted to impose special salary and bonus increases specifically for the RDOs. It was NUM's rejection of those increases at both mines that precipitated the strikes, and the migrants' flight to the mountains of Marikana.

There can be no doubt that many mistakes have been made in the reaction to the RDOs withdrawal from work at Impala Platinum early in January this year. The Minister of Mines is probably correct to be **furious with managers at both Impala and Lonmin** for agreeing to increases to strikers who were not members of a recognised union and, most importantly, completely outside of a bargaining structure that has taken decades to evolve. The effect was simultaneously to shred both the recently negotiated wage contracts and the legitimacy of the NUM, which now faces a struggle for its life. Another critical mistake followed the brutal killings of NUM organisers and police. For decades the union has exploited the forms of horrible retributive violence that have been nurtured by migrants and their institutions. Yet just three days before the Marikana massacre, the Secretary General of NUM, a figure of singular power in South Africa, called for **'a special task force or the [Army] to deal decisively with the criminal elements in Rustenburg.'** And the police commanders utterly misread the crowd-control requirements for handling thousands of adult men armed to the teeth with the weapons of a fondly remembered regimental past.

But the biggest mistakes are much older. These concern, as Hartford has shown, the appalling neglect of migrancy in the gold and platinum industries. His point is that migrancy is the norm in mining everywhere, for the simple reason that human populations do not settle in the areas of valuable mineral deposits. But the South African mining industry has been operating with a model of migrancy that presumes workers without citizenship. The RDOs work, for example, for 11 months at a time, returning to their rural homes only over Christmas. There are no facilities for short time contracts, return visits, or even the sorts of decent dormitory housing that are typical in enclave mines throughout the African continent. The remedies are obvious. What is not clear is that the South African mining industry will actually last long enough to implement them.

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