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Worker agency in a post-apartheid mining workplace: A review and reflection on the Marikana tragedy

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Worker Agency in a Post-apartheid Mining Workplace: A Review and Reflection on the Marikana Tragedy

UJ Sociology, Anthropology and Development Studies
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Introduction

Worker agency – the idea that workers are not timid or passive but rather active, creative and resilient reactors to capitalist and managerially defined work structures – is a fundamental part of the sociology of work and organisational psychology. A number of labour process studies have shown the significance of human agency in the organisation and reorganisation of work. The ability of workers to socially organise work in ways that make sense to them long manifested itself during the scientific management movement despite Taylor's (Taylor 1911, 1919, 1947) failure to recognise the worker as a significant social actor within the workplace – the notion that was reasserted by the human relations movement theory (Roethlisberger and Dickinson 1939).

The role of worker agency in the day-to-day production process was illuminated by the human relations Hawthorne studies in the 1920s. The human relations researchers discovered the significance and contribution of informal workplace practices after a series of experiments conducted in the Bank Wiring Observation Room. Although the results of the human relations experimental studies on the relationship between illumination and worker efficiency could not produce convincing results, what the Hawthorne studies illuminated was the significance of the "human factor" in the day-to-day running of the production process – particularly the social control of work behaviour. The human relations Hawthorne studies revealed that the workers'

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response to production goals was influenced not only by individual motives but also by collective interests, beliefs and sentiments of the work group (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939).

Since the findings of the human relations Hawthorne studies, a number of sociology of work studies have shown the manner in which worker agency plays itself out in the workplace. The extant literature reveals that shop-floor workers exercise their agency in a variety of forms. In the workplace, shop-floor workers informally exercise their agency to resist, oppose, accommodate, consent and/or both resist and consent to management initiatives in ways that make sense to them and enable them to maintain autonomy over production and the effort-bargain. This has been discovered, as noted earlier, by human relations researchers at Hawthorne plants in the 1920s through the 1970s in Burawoy's (1979) ethnographic study of machine operators' game of making out and by recent studies on worker's informal responses to new forms of work such as teamworking and performance-based payment systems enticing workers to expend effort at the point of production (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Bolton and Houlihan 2009; Collinson and Ackroyd 2005; Rosenthal 2004; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995).

As will be discussed in detail in the section that follows, worker agency proved instrumental for workers in fighting coercive and repressive labour and management practices in colonial and apartheid mining workplace regimes. The agency of underground workers to resist the despotic management system was a boon to the formation of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the 1980s. In reviewing and reflecting on the agency of underground workers in the mining workplace and the manner in which such agency was exercised in the colonial and apartheid mining workplace regimes, this paper seeks to pose a question: if workers can exercise their agency to restrict or expand output at the point of production, can they use their agency to withdraw or extend their union membership. In a nutshell, what role, if any, and in what form has post-apartheid worker agency played itself out in the Marikana tragedy and wildcat strikes of 2012?

Its shared thematic focus on worker agency notwithstanding, this paper reviews the relevant historical/theoretical mining literature, the constraints of space preventing an extension of coverage to ethnographic material (for which see Phakathi 2011, 2013). The paper consists of

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five sections, including this introduction. The second section of this paper provides a discussion and analysis of the manner in which underground gold miners covertly and overtly exercised their agency to resist the repressive system of worker control. The third section concentrates on the role of trade union leadership and worker agency in the post-apartheid reorganisation of the mining workplace. The fourth and concluding sections reflect on the agency of mineworkers and trade union leadership in relation to the Marikana tragedy and wildcat strikes of 2012.

Worker agency in a repressive and despotic mining workplace

Despite their weakened bargaining power in the racialised labour market (Johnstone 1976; Leggasick 1975; Wilson 1972), black mineworkers were not passive to a repressive labour regime in the mine compound and in the underground workplace. Black mineworkers engaged in a variety of covert and overt restrictive practices against a despotic system of management control.

Covert forms of worker resistance

Cohen (1991) asserts that covert forms of labour protest were central to African workers' consciousness and opposition to repressive capitalist labour regimes. Cohen (1991) points out that African workers engaged in a variety of hidden forms of resistance including desertion, output restriction, go-slows; effort and time bargaining, sabotage, deliberate accidents, feigning sicknesses, drunkenness and theft (see also Gordon 1977; Gouldner 1954; Nichols and Beynon 1977; Prasad and Prasad 1998, 2000). To illustrate worker theft as a covert resistance tactic to supplement their meager wages, drawing on Van Onselen's (1976) findings from the Rhodesian mines, Cohen (1991:107) notes that:

> Daily, hundreds of petty crimes were committed on the mining proprieties with the specific objective of rectifying the balance between employees and their employers. African workers constantly pilfered small items of mine stores – such as candles – or helped themselves to substantial quantities of detonators and dynamite which they used for fishing. Wage rates were altered on documents and hundreds of work and 'skoff' [*meal*] tickets forged by miners who sought to gain compensations for what they had been denied by the system.

It was the hidden or overt forms of worker resistance that the mine employers and the apartheid state often found difficult to detect and suppress, and out of which black trade unionism emerged

(Allen 1992, 2003a; 2003b; James 1990). Black mineworkers projected their frustration against coercive or extra-economic methods by "working the system" (Thompson and Bannon 1985), culminating in the development of informal or covert forms of resistance. Covert forms of resistance incorporated various practices and ways of coping with tight management control, coercive and despotic white supervision, and extremely hazardous underground working conditions. As Nichols and Armstrong (1976) discovered at ChemCo in England, there are various ways in which shop-floor workers resent management's authority and the manner in which that authority maintains control over the worker's working day. Industrial sabotage (Nichols and Armstrong 1976; Taylor and Walton 1971) is one of the strategies underground black miners engaged in to cope with work and work relations in a despotic mining workplace. Industrial sabotage occurs:

> In a situation in which workers cannot organise or bargain, [when] they tend to react in other ways … individuals tend to destroy or mutilate objects or each other in the work environment. This is done either to reduce tension or frustration or, on the other hand, to assert some form of direct control over one's work or life. Unplanned smashing and spontaneous destruction are signs of a powerless individual or group … (Webster 1978:18).

It is argued that the hazardous working conditions of the underground mining workplace encouraged solidarity amongst miners, not only for the purposes of ensuring worker safety (see Fitzpatrick 1980; Leger 1992) but to avoid being exploited and manipulated by a despotic system of worker control. This is best illustrated by Gordon's (1977) finding of the workplace culture of brotherhood in a Namibian mining workplace. Gordon (1977) discovered that through the work culture of brotherhood, black underground workers prevented competition, created interpersonal relationships and relieved pressures of workloads whereby if a particular worker worked hard, management would expect the same performance from other workers. A worker who did not conform to brotherhood norms was (and is) regarded as a sell-out/informer or non-brother.

According to Gordon (1977), brotherhood was the basis of solidarity among black mineworkers, not only in the underground mining workplace but also in the compound. It was established through forms such as friendship, kinship and tribal connections. It valued solidarity and self-respect. Through brotherhood, the miners rendered the coercion and abuse of labour control ineffective "because of the high level of resistance and solidarity it [*brotherhood*] generates"

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(Hodson 1995:88). Social support from fellow workers has also been discovered in other workplace settings. For instance, Santino (1989) discovered that railroad porters, who suffered both racial and class-based degradation, engaged on supportive group activities to cope with a hostile and abusive environment.

The South African trade union movement and political liberation emerged in the context of these cultural formations and hidden ways of coping with work and management's authority, or what Sitas (1985) calls *defensive combinations* rooted in the networks of mutual support (see also Delius 1989; Von Holdt 2003). Sitas (1985:5) argues that "cultural formations that underpinned the union movement, although they originated as living arrangements and rural roots, were linked to production. It was in the workplace that contemporary worker leadership emerged, cutting across regionalism and ethnicity, uniting workers at the point of production." In the view of Moodie (1994:23), "informal networks of support among these workers gave them a degree of leverage against management, providing some protection against the worst depredations of work, supervisors and compound overseers." From this perspective, the working class culture is viewed as an empowering and mobilising tool for workers.

Moodie (1983:182) goes on to say that "mine culture, for all its dependence upon mining as a form of production, is sustained and reproduced in the social structure which defines relations between management and miners, and in patterned personal interactions between the miners themselves." For this reason, Moodie (1983) argued, the interactional reality of mine life should be studied in process and "if we do that, we discover a much higher degree of reformulation of self-identity in the mine world …" (Moodie 1983:178), without which worker militancy, consciousness and black trade unionism would have not been developed.

Overt forms of worker resistance
While white mineworkers did engage in strikes (for instance the 1903, 1907 and 1922 strikes) if the employers failed to meet their demands, black mineworkers were also able to organise strikes in spite of their weakened position in a racial and repressive industry. During the course of the twentieth century, black mineworkers engaged in a series of strikes against the cheap labour system (Allen 1992; O'Meara 1975; Webster 1978).

This paper focuses only on the following African mineworkers' strikes: the 1920, the 1946, the 1970s and the 1987 strikes. These strikes are significant to understanding the nature of labour-management conflict in South African gold mines for the larger part of the twentieth century. They highlight the power and resilience of black mineworkers, the majority of whom were not from South Africa itself (Crush et al. 1991).

The 1920 strike was the first large strike undertaken by black mineworkers. About 71,000 mineworkers participated in the strike for better wages, to lower prices in the compound concession stores and against the job colour bar system. This strike took place after the end of the First World War when the national economy and the gold mines were hard-hit by inflation. The mine owners refused to increase the wages of black mineworkers in spite of inflation. The strike was short-lived and unsuccessful. Although the strike failed to pay dividends for the black mineworkers, it displayed the extent to which the African mineworkers had been proletarianised (Crush et al. 1991; Webster 1978).

The 1946 African mineworkers' strike was also a response to rising post-war inflation and deteriorating conditions in the compounds. The African Mine Workers Union (AMWU) went on strike against the cheap migrant labour system (O'Meara 1975). The AMWU demanded adequate provision of food and a wage increase of R1.00 per day (Webster 1978). These demands were not accepted, and thus the AMWU called a general strike. It is estimated that between 74,000 and 76,000 black mineworkers participated in the strike for 4 days (O'Meara 1975; Webster 1978). The strike jeopardised production, as a number of gold mines were brought to a standstill. As O'Meara (1975:160) notes: "Monthly production fell between July and August on 31 of the 45 mines, with total monthly production brought down by 169,800 tons to the lowest level since 1937." Although this strike did not improve the working and living conditions of the African mineworkers, it demonstrated that African mineworkers were not passive in the face of the gold mines' despotic regime of labour control.

From the mid-1940s onwards, the African mineworkers' strikes were not merely against the repressive mine labour regime but against the apartheid regime in general. In collaboration with various labour, political and community organisations, black mineworkers openly and massively

resisted apartheid generally and white power in the workplace. Their struggle in a despotic mining industry took the form of social movement unionism (Lambert and Webster 1988; Scipes 1992; Seidman 1994; Webster 1988).

The 1970 strikes took the form of destruction of beer halls, offices and compound buildings. Mine management paid dearly as workers destroyed mine property and set alight the centres of managerial control. Mine management found it hard to suppress worker dissent. The strikes of this period destroyed the centres of labour and production control (Crush et al. 1991). For instance, at Anglo American's Western Deep Levels gold mine:

> The violent resistance of the workers disturbed production, which declined from 3.2 million tons milled in 1973 to 2.9 million tons in 1976. Gold production slid from 48,119 kilograms in 1974 to 44,532 kilograms in 1976 as the number of black miners declined from 15,494 in 1973 to 12,310 in 1975 when mine management complained of a general shortage of labour. This dramatic disturbance of mine discipline and labour supplies affected the mine's profitability which fell by about R35-million between 1975 and 1976 (Hemson undated:7).

Despite the various repressive measures the mine managers devised to restore worker discipline, the turmoil in the mine compound continued, culminating in the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission of Inquiry by government between 1977 and 1981. The last of the six reports produced by the Commission, was on "Industrial Relations in the Mining Industry". Collectively, these reports "had a major impact on labour relations in South Africa and the legal rights of black workers and trade unions" (Crush et al. 1991:24).

The Wiehahn Commission recommended that gold mines should shift away from coercion to negotiation by recognising black trade unions and incorporating black mineworkers in the official industrial relations system. In 1982, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was formed. The NUM made the most of the opportunity to transform the gold mining industry. For the first time, a black trade union participated in collective bargaining forums and negotiated agreements with employers. The NUM played a vital role in effecting change in an industry marked by racial and coercive labour practices for a century. In the 1980s, a considerable proportion of the African labour force had become "career" miners ... They spent more time

working in the mines and less in the rural homestead. As a result, they found it difficult to tolerate the appalling working and living conditions in the gold mines (Crush et al. 1991; James 1990). The NUM focused more on organising the miners "that experienced the mines as a permanent and continuous source of [wage] employment" (Crush et al. 1991:195). The compound, contrary to the earlier intentions of the mine managers to suppress worker resistance, proved a crucial resource for the NUM in mobilising and organising the rank-and-file (Allen 1992, 2003b; James 1990). Crush et al. (1991:187) note that:

> By late 1985, the NUM had a membership of 200,000 (100,000 paid up); one year later, the figures were 320,000 (and 180,000 paid up) ... By 1987, it had organised over half of the total labour force ... Not surprisingly, the union made its most gains at those mines to which organisers were given access, where the union was granted facilities, and where it was able to obtain recognition agreements.

Despite the official recognition of black trade unionism, the various mining houses did not relinquish the racially coercive cheap labour practices. The 1987 mineworkers' strike was a response to the mine management's reluctance to improve the wages, working and living conditions of black mineworkers. This was the largest, longest and costliest strike in the history of the South African gold mining industry. Unlike the previous African mineworkers' strikes, this was a more coordinated and focused strike. The mine managers tried all possible means to restrain the strike, but failed (Allen 2003b). Against all odds, the NUM was able to make its presence felt as the most influential and resilient trade union organisation in the history of the South African industrial relations system (Allen 1992, 2003a, 2003b, Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008).

The apartheid labour regime antagonised not only the relationships of white and black mineworkers, but also union-management relationships. For many years, South Africa's labour-management relationship was plagued by a workplace culture of low trust – a *zero-sum* type of relationship because of the apartheid or colonial workplace regime. In the 1990s, the National Manpower Commission identified the following factors to be a major cause of poor economic and productivity performance in South African workplaces (Webster 1999a, 1999b): lack of management skills in leadership, mentoring, work organisation and decision-making abilities; authoritarian and at times racist supervision on the shop-floor; a general lack of education and

training of the workforce, which was seen to have a negative impact on skills acquisition; lack of competence/capacity among both management and union representatives in industrial re-engineering and general absence of workplace democracy and inadequate worker participation

This is precisely the challenge that had confronted the South African gold mining industry since the 1970s, given the legacy of the apartheid and despotic workplace regime that created a workplace culture of low trust between management and labour. The early 1990s economic, social, and political changes compelled the mining industry to transform work and work relations for a new post-apartheid workplace order which values worker consent over coercion.

Work reorganisation, trade union leadership and worker agency in a post-apartheid mining workplace

The role of trade unions in facilitating or hindering the introduction of new work practices is well documented. A review of literature on unions and workplace change processes reveals that the union's support is critically important for the successful introduction of new forms of work organisation. A number of studies have shown that trade unions can resist or support change in the organisation of work (Ackers et al. 1996; Bacon 2004; Nissen 1997; Parker and Slaughter 1993; Wood 1996). However, McNabb and Whitfield (1997:823) point out that the unions' support for the introduction of new work systems has been understood "primarily within the context of an adversarial system of industrial relations rather than in one aimed at fostering co-operation and participation at the workplace."

They point out further that "unions are aware of the increasingly competitive economic environment in which firms operate. To protect the position of their members in such a hostile environment, unions are willing to assist management in the introduction of new work practices, in exchange for concessions on wages and job security"[2] (McNabb and Whitfield 1997:824). In similar vein, Kumar (1995:71) points out that "while there are incalculable risks in whatever

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[2] In the South African context, with the demise of the apartheid workplace regime in the early 1990s, the industrial relations system shifted from an adversarial to a codeterminational type of employer/labour relationship in the day-to-day running of the workplace, as evidenced by the role played by the NUM in the restructuring of the gold mining industry in response to the declining levels of productivity and employment in the 1990s.

choices unions make, work reorganisation also presents new opportunities to increase labour's role and influence in enterprise decision-making based on their own independent agenda on humanisation of the workplace."

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy and integration into a competitive global economy in the 1990s rendered the apartheid workplace regime obsolete (Webster and Von Holdt 2005). The 1990s was an era of low gold price. South Africa's gold mining sector went through a severe gold slump. The productivity of the gold mining industry was being threatened by the falling world price of gold, rising working costs, declining levels of gold production and shrinking levels of employment (Leger and Nicol 1991, 1992; Malherbe and Segal 2000; Nattrass 1994, 1995; Standing et al. 1996). A number of gold mines became marginal as they found it extremely difficult to mine gold profitably. This had serious repercussions for the country's gold mining sector as a generator of employment and source of revenue not only for South Africa but also her neighbouring countries including Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Botswana (Crush and James 1995; Harrington et al. 2004; Seidman 1993; 1997).

The gold mining crisis of the 1990s was the cause for concern not only for the mine employers but also for the state and organised labour. Drastic measures were required to deal with the crisis and restructure the gold mining industry in ways that could generate wealth, revenue and preserve employment. The challenge was the manner in which the restructuring of the gold mining industry was to be forged given the history of colonial and apartheid labour practices. The crisis and challenges of mining gold at a profit could no longer be offset by means of coercive, racial and cheap labour practices. The 1990s heralded a new labour regime on South African gold mines. Owing to the labour movement's struggle against a repressive labour regime and apartheid in general, the NUM, became an influential actor in the restructuring of the gold mining industry in the 1990s.

In 1995, relentless pressure from the NUM persuaded the mine employers and government to establish the Leon Commission of Inquiry into safety and health in the South African mining industry. This was the first and by far the comprehensive Commission of Inquiry to look into safety and health in the South African mining industry for more than thirty years. The

recommendations of the Leon Commission of Inquiry culminated in the drafting of the Mine Health and Safety Act (MHSA) of 1996. For the first time in the history of the South African mining industry, this Act entrenched the right of workers to refuse to do dangerous work as one of the means with which to create a healthy, safe and productive mining industry (Leon Commission Report 1995).

In response to the falling international price of gold, declining levels of gold production, rising working costs and declining levels of employment, in 1997 and for the first time in the history of the South African industrial relations system, a tripartite structure was established whereby the mine employers, government and labour (led by the NUM), jointly negotiated, at industry and shaft levels, a number of productivity agreements and developed a variety of innovative production systems and human resource management strategies geared towards improving productivity, competitiveness, employment, equity and skills development in the post-apartheid gold mining industry (Bezuidenhout and Kenny 1997; Dansereau 2006; Kenny and Bezuidenhout 1999 Webster and Omar 2003).

These mine level productivity initiatives mirror the new models of work organisation and human resource management innovations widely introduced and implemented in manufacturing industries across the world (Appelbaum 2002; Appelbaum et al. 2000; Barker 1993; Gee et al. 1996; Horwitz and Smith 1998). As former Chief Executive Officer of AngloGold Ashanti, Bobby Godsell, argued with regard to the restructuring of the gold mining workplace:

> Work structures have remained remarkably unchanged for many decades because of static technology, the impact of apartheid and the previously closed nature – in times past – of the South African economy. We now face the transition from a Taylor-type of work structure or Fordism, as is called in sociology of work terms, to models more appropriate for an information-driven society (cited in Webster et al. 1999).

In the 1990s, a number of gold mines reorganised work through new forms of working practices such as new forms of frontline supervision, teamworking and production bonuses linked to performance targets aimed at creating new kinds of workers who could identify with the goals of

the company by expending rather than withdrawing effort at the point of production. This signalled a shift from worker coercion to worker consent in the day-to-day running of the production process. Phakathi's (2011) study of worker responses to work reorganisation in a deep-level gold mining workplace revealed that worker consent to new working practices may embody new or "soft-touch" forms of worker coercion due to the malign effects of new production systems such as the intensification of work in search of heightened levels of worker performance and workplace productivity. However, the gold miners' informal work practice of making a plan (*planisa*) suggests that the miners are far from being victims of deleterious effects and contradictions of capitalist production system.

Planisa is a Fanakalo (mining *lingua franca*) injunction, entreating miners to deploy their skills and ingenuity to tackle the day-to-day problems posed by the endemic uncertainties and organisational dysfunctions of mining. Planisa involves creative, self-organised improvisation and initiative on an individual and collective basis, often circumventing standard work rules. Making a plan (*planisa)* down the mine is an innovative yet risky informal work practice underground workers adopt to tackle production bottlenecks and gain control over their working day. A detailed discussion of the miners' underground practice of *planisa* is beyond the scope of this paper (see Phakathi 2002, 2009, 2013).

Weak union leadership, unionised worker dissatisfaction and the Marikana tragedy

It is important to note that shop-floor workers are not only critical of management motives, but also question the motives of their union leaders. Workers can be critical of their unions in that, Flanders (1970:40) argues:

> The first and overriding responsibility of all trade unions is to the welfare of their own members. That is the primary commitment, not to a firm, not to an industry, not to a nation. A union collects its members' contributions and demands their loyalty specifically for the purpose of protecting their interests as they see them, not their true or best interests as defined by others.

Much has been said about the role of unions in the restructuring of work. However, not much is known about the views and perceptions of shop-floor workers on the manner in which their trade

unions deal with wage negotiations and other conditions of employment. The author's ethnographic research and other studies conducted by Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout (2008) have revealed that the post-apartheid trade unionism at shaft level has been marked by weak union leadership and unionised worker dissatisfaction. The trade union leaders' obsession with tripartite politics has not strengthened but rendered union leadership ineffective in dealing with the changing membership, meeting the expectations of their members and managing the heightened political awareness of the rank-and-file members (Buhlungu and Tshoaedi 2012).

The NUM's success in transforming the post-apartheid gold mining workplace towards efficiency, productivity and equity has presented new challenges for the union at mine level (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2010; Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008). For instance, in one gold mine I studied, I observed and discovered that weak union leadership and conflicts within the union contributed to the perceived unfairness of the bonus system by stope (underground) workers (Phakathi 2013). At this mine, the union leadership was dogged by internal conflict, to the detriment of union solidarity or internal solidarity[3] (Levesque and Murray 2007). From the sociology of labour point of view, this is an interesting finding in that:

> Conflict is a phenomenon which always arouses interest, and yet within the substantial body of literature on trade union organisation, the question of internal, as opposed to external, conflict has received scant attention. Emphasis has been laid on conflict between unions and the owners and managers of industry, with analyses of strikes, go-slows and the rest, but little has been said of conflict within unions themselves (Hemingway 1976:1).

Hemingway (1976:17-26) identifies four issues over which union leaders and members tend to clash over include *employment conditions*, *union organisation*, *external affiliations* and *procedural issues*.

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[3] Levesque and Murray (2007:493) assert that internal solidarity "relates to the mechanisms developed in the workplace to ensure democracy and collective cohesion among workers." Conversely, external solidarity "refers to the capacity of local unions to work with their communities as well as alliances to build horizontal and vertical coordination with other unions as well alliances among unions." The high levels of unity and solidarity in the mining workplace and beyond the mine gates gave the NUM considerable bargaining power in the dismantling of the apartheid workplace regime (Allen 2003a, 2003b; Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2010; Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008).

Conflict over issues of employment conditions relates to pay settlement involving a third party such as the employer or the State or judiciary if the issue involves the law (for example pay settlement relating to mining related occupational diseases such as silicosis). Conflict within unions also relates to other aspects of working conditions such as number of working hours, number and length of holidays, safety, manning levels, redundancy and closed-shop policies. These are some of the issues over which union representatives and members clashed over on South African mines. A case in point are the 2012 rock drill operators' (RDOs) dissatisfaction with and strike over their job grade and wage levels initially at Impala Platinum and subsequently at Lonmin Platinum and Anglo American Platinum (Stewart 2013).

Conflict on issues of union organisation occurs in areas such as the internal finances of the union, the union's rules, the treatment of different members within the union and their organisational position. Buhlungu and Tshoaedi (2012) note that mismanagement of funds and bribery are one of the factors that have created conflict between union leaders and the rank-and-file members of COSATU affiliated unions – of which the NUM is no exception. Corruption in the form of bribes (what the underground gold miners referred to as *intshontsho* in Fanakalo) was one of the factors which weakened the shaft stewards' leadership. Certain shaft stewards were alleged to be soliciting bribes to facilitate the employment of new employees as well as promotion for underground miners. I discovered that the culture of bribery was practised not only by shaft stewards but also by a number of mine officials, especially senior administrative staff.[4] The following remark from John, the stope worker, illustrates the point:

> For your things to go well you have to bribe the people in charge. The APOs [assistant personnel officers] are hampering our promotion and career development. They hold and hide information. They only do favours for their friends. They want to be bribed. I do not know whether this bribery thing [*itshontsho*] is what they are instructed to do or trained for.

Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout (2008) call this tendency of NUM shop stewards to sell jobs in the form of bribes "the rise of the *entrepreneurial union representative*." In the mine studied, the

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[4] I did not only hear about bribes, but also observed and experienced it: I was asked for a bribe by a male nurse when I was doing my underground medical examination at the mine's occupational health centre. The nurse wanted to take advantage of me, as it was clearly indicated in the form that I was a new mine employee. He asked me for a bribe to ensure that I pass the test.

rank-and-file union members were of the view that mine managers were aware of the weaknesses of their union representatives and were using that to their advantage. Billy, a stope worker, remarked:

> Mine management is exploiting the union to divide us because the wage negotiations are looming ... so that we will be divided during the time of wage negotiations.

Conflict on issues of external affiliations erupts when members or leaders take certain actions because of their political (and perhaps religious) allegiances and beliefs. At the time of fieldwork, divisions within the NUM representatives mirrored the factions in the ANC-led government, where the union was perceived to be dominated by Xhosa-speaking members and leaders. This was a time when the ANC leadership was particularly unhappy with the leadership style of the former President Thabo Mbeki, whom they recalled a few months before the April 2009 national elections (see Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008).

Conflict over procedural issues relates to the manner in which union decisions or actions are made or carried out. In the mine studied, the union members were not happy with the manner in which the union representatives conveyed their grievances to management and took decisions with management. As a result, they lacked faith in their union representatives. As one union member commented after a mass union meeting organised by NUM shaft stewards in the mine hostel:

> We told the union [*shop stewards*] that we do not like this type of production bonus. However, we found ourselves using the new production bonus system, having not approved it.

Another underground worker had this to say:

> Management is dancing on top of the union. The union is there to negotiate, not to automatically accept what management tells it.

The inability of shop stewards to deal effectively with these issues weakened union leadership and crippled the quality of service rendered to the rank-and-file members, culminating in conflict

within the union. This was particularly evident in the mass meetings organised by the NUM shaft stewards. As one unionised member commented after a mass union meeting in the mine hostel:

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Another underground worker had this to say:

> Management is dancing on top of the union. The union is there to negotiate, not to automatically accept what management tells it.

I observed that these mass meetings tended to be chaotic and demonstrated the lack of faith in shaft stewards by the rank and file. One disappointed rank-and-file union member, by the name of Kai, had this to say after one mass meeting held at the arena inside the mine hostel:

> The NUM does not benefit me. What is the point of paying my membership fee every month?

It transpired from the conversations I had with the NUM shaft stewards that the union did not give mine management approval for the new stope team incentive scheme. One NUM shaft steward, Makwakwa, expressed the point as follows:

> There is a problem with the new bonus system, and we [NUM shaft stewards] did not agree with management about its implementation – that it can be implemented. They [mine management] just implemented it because they said they [mine management] had a prerogative to manage whereas at the same time they [mine management] were compelled to consult with us [NUM shaft stewards]. The workers are right that this thing is killing them. After five years, not all of them would be here due to the new bonus system. I assume I do not have facts about that. Why am I saying that is because workers knock off late …

At shaft or mine level, the union has struggled to engage robustly with management in areas pertaining to conditions of employment in a manner that satisfies its constituency. As the President of the NUM pointed out:

> It is not happening everywhere, some shaft stewards deal with these issues … Some shaft [shop] stewards of NUM, in some areas you will find that shaft [shop] stewards become too close [to] management for our liking as a union [NUM].

While the NUM has played a significant role in the transformation of the mining industry to the advantage of its members, at shaft level it has found difficulty in effectively engaging mine management in areas relating to changes in the organisation of work much to the dissatisfaction of the rank-and-file union members. Contemporary studies on South African mines have shown that at shaft level the NUM has had difficulty to engage robustly with management on issues pertaining to work reorganisation as a result of weak shaft steward leadership characterised by internal conflicts, careerism, corruption, succession battles and tribalism or ethnicity (Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008; Buhlungu and Tshoaedi 2012). For these reasons, Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout (2008) point out that the post-apartheid trade union leadership in the mining industry has been marked by tensions and divisions between the rank-and-file workers and their union leaders.

As much as mine management involves unions in decision-making processes pertaining to workplace change initiatives, the union representatives tended to be bound by the management decisions as they did with the introduction of the new production bonus system, in order to increase the productivity of the mine (Levesque and Murray 2007; Webster and Von Holdt 2005). It is however important to note that unions may find it imperative to support the introduction of new work practices not only for the purposes of increasing workplace productivity but to also protect the jobs of their members (McNabb and Whitfield 1997), as happened in the restructuring of the South African gold mining industry in the 1990s (Dansereau 2006; Diering 1993; Kenny and Bezuidenhout 1999a, 1999b; Malherbe and Segal 2000; Standing et al. 1996).

In one gold mine I studied, the mine manager, McHughes, went as far as campaigning for increased levels of gold production by holding mass meetings with underground workers in the mine hostels:

> We came to the mine to have money to look after our wives and children, our families. Do not injure the person you work with. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure safety. Check for [rock] support. Do not forget ventilation. Taking chances [risks] leads to injuries and accidents ... We are here to work for gold and money. This mine wants gold ... *Madoda* [guys], it is our responsibility to produce gold every day ... Loco operators, empty the ore-bins! Haulage crews, make sure the rails are okay! Production has declined. If we do not address the problem of gold

production as soon as possible, this mine would be closed ... We need to blast every day safely. We need to make sure there is a job every day and make the mine number one [in the gold mining business].

The mine manager's words illustrate the production pressure the mine studied was faced with and management's desperation for workers to expend effort at the rock-face inside the pit. Mine management's production campaigns in the mine hostel point to Webster and Von Holdt's (2005:11) notion of wildcat cooperation, whereby "instead of negotiating [workplace] change with the trade unions, management seeks to elicit informal consensus and support from workers, by-passing the unions in the process."

In the mine studied, divisions in union leadership affected the union's strategic capacity to deal with mine management on matters relating to the reorganisation of work. In the context of union power in the workplace, Levesque and Murray (2005:494) point out that strategic capacity "refers to the discursive ability of local unions to shape and put forward their own agenda." The NUM shop stewards lacked the ability to shape and put forward their own agenda. Hence, the rank-and-file members lacked faith in their union representatives. Tom, a union member, commented:

> There are problems here with the union [NUM]. When they come to us, they come with decisions already made. They just come to tell us. Whether we agree or not, it does not matter. They have already made [the] decisions ... When we follow this thing through, the manager would say the union has signed. So when we ask them they would say they do not know anything. The union [shop stewards] comes to us with already made decisions. They [shop stewards] no longer serve us well. Recently it [union] is divided ... generally we are dissatisfied with it. The union is supposed to be your lawyer, but you would find that they [shop stewards] just go to listen [to] what the management says.

The mine management was well aware of the weaknesses of the union representatives. Gert, the Human Resources Manager, admitted that at times factions in the union created problems not only for workers or union members but also for management. As Robert, an Industrial Relations Officer, remarked:

> The union [shaft stewards] has a tendency to bypass the views of its members. This creates a lot of tension between the company and the workforce. The union approves deals with mine management [without having] really communicated with

the workforce [members]. We as mine management, we cannot do their job. We take their word with the impression that the workforce [members] has given them [union] a go-ahead.

The following factors weakened union leadership in the mine: tribalism, careerism, succession battles and corruption (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2010; Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008). As far as tribalism and factions in the union are concerned, this is what some of the union members had to say. Roland commented:

The union is dividing us. This is apartheid. This thing will create conflict among the mineworkers.

Mathew shared the same view:

It [union representatives] distinguishes between Xhosas and Sothos [South African tribes] ... So we told them that we [members] think that the union now serves Xhosas. So it is better that we leave [or quit] the union. We also have money [membership fee] deducted [from salary] at the end of the month.

Another factor that weakened union leadership in the mine was that by virtue of being elected, shaft stewards used their positions as a stepping-stone to managerial positions in the organisational hierarchy of the mine. This finding is consistent with Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout's (2008) findings that the NUM shaft stewards' obsession with upward mobility in both the company's and trade union organisational ladders has:

Detached shaft [shop] stewards from the shop-floor or membership base and culminated in high levels of distrust between union representatives and members. It is important to note that in the apartheid workplace regime, union officials were victimised. With the waning of the [job] colour bar in the mining industry, union officials have become a pool from which supervisors and future managers are recruited (Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2008:12).

The Marikana tragedy was a culmination of a series of unheard mineworker voices which fell on deaf ears' of the shaft stewards in the various mass unions meetings held in the mine hostel arenas. The Marikana tragedy and wildcat strikes of 2012 signify the power of worker agency not only against management but also against their trade union leaders. The formation of the Workers Committee and decline of NUM membership shows the extent to which the post-apartheid rank-and-file unionised underground workers are critical of the leadership behaviour of

their union leaders (Alexander et al. 2012). While the NUM has heightened the political awareness of its members since the demise of the apartheid mining workplace regime, it has failed to deal with the demands of such a politically conscious and increasingly changing membership with diverse aspirations at the point of production down the mine. As violent as they were, the 2012 Marikana events and wildcat strikes have highlighted the resilience of mineworkers when industry leaders alike failed to listen to their voice and make sense of what such a voice was really begging for (Alexander et al. 2012; Nite and Stewart 2012). The formation of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) is a litmus test that the NUM has long been under the scrutiny of certain segments of its rank-and-file membership. It has been reported that the NUM has lost more than 30 000 members of more than 90 000 members in the Rustenburg platinum belt (*The Star,* 21 February 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the significance of the agency of underground workers in a post-apartheid mining workplace in the light of the Marikana tragedy and wildcat strikes that took place in 2012. The paper has largely traced worker agency to a repressive system of labour control in order to make sense of the significance of the agency of the rank-and-file underground workers in a post-apartheid mining workplace. The crux of the matter is that underground workers have the ability to shake and shape the post-apartheid labour relations system even in the context weakened trade union leadership. The argument being that as much as the rank-and-file workers have the ability to exercise their agency against the mine bosses, they are capable to exercise their free will against their trade union.

The Marikana tragedy and wildcat strikes of 2012 resulted from the failure of mine bosses, government and trade union leaders to take the mine employee voice seriously much to the annoyance and dissatisfaction of the rank-and-file mineworkers. Meaningful employee engagement will not only help the NUM and AMCU in increasing their membership but will also improve the mining industry's labour relations system and investment prospects. The paper calls attention to mine employee voice, meaningful employee engagement and empowerment if the mining executives, government and organised labour are to effectively resolve the labour

relations woes that have worsened the social, economic and political crisis the industry is faced with.

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