

Exploitation intensifiée : accord de rendement des opérateurs de perforatrice après une grève dans une mine de platine sud-africaine

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Résumé

Les opérateurs de perforatrice de roches dans la ceinture de mines de platine de la province du Nord-Ouest de l'Afrique du Sud ont lancé une série de grèves en 2012, qui ont mené aux célèbres affrontements à Marikana en août de la même année, dans lesquels les comités de travailleurs ont joué un rôle de premier plan. Il est un aspect moins connu, c'est que les comités d'opérateurs de perforatrice existent depuis trente ans et qu'ils ont négocié directement avec la direction des mines. Leurs actions ont eu des répercussions sur les relations de travail internes, les opérateurs de perforatrice ayant eu par la suite des relations ambiguës avec les syndicats dans les mines où ils étaient membres. Cet article traite du rôle central joué par le comité des opérateurs de perforatrice d'un puits minier en 2005, à la suite d'une grève menée par plus de 400 opérateurs de perforatrice à la fin de 2004, qui entraîna leur congédiement, et leur éventuel éventuellement réembauche. En décrivant les séquelles de cette grève, l'article retrace l'existence du comité des opérateurs de perforatrice de ce puits et la façon dont ceux-ci furent contraints d'accepter une entente de rendement inhabituelle pour intensifier le rythme de travail. Ce compte-rendu démontre que le pouvoir objectif des opérateurs de perforatrice découle de leur rôle central dans le processus de production du minerai. L'auteur soutient que pour mieux comprendre et expliquer la vague de grèves de 2012, les affrontements de Marikana et le récent tumulte dans les mines de platine - ainsi que leur avenir - le caractère, le rôle et les luttes des opérateurs de perforatrice et de leurs comités indépendants et distincts de longue date doivent être au cœur de l'analyse.

Intensified Exploitation: Rock Drill Operators' Post-strike Productivity Deal in a South African Platinum Mine

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Abstract

Rock drill operators on the platinum belt in the North West province of South Africa initiated a strike wave in 2012, which led to the well-known events at Marikana in August of that year. The role of workers' committees featured prominently. Less well known is that rock drill operators' committees go back thirty years and negotiated directly with mine management. Their actions impacted on intra-working class relations, with rock drill operators consequently having had an ambiguous relationship with trade unions on the mines of which they were members. This article discusses the central role of the rock drill operators' committee on one mine shaft in 2005, following the strike of over 400 rock drill operators in late 2004 which led to their dismissal, though eventually they were reemployed. In detailing the aftermath of that strike, the paper traces the existence of the rock drill operator committee on this shaft and how they were compelled to engage in an unusual productivity deal resulting in intensified work efforts. The account demonstrates how the objective power of the rock drill operators derives from their central role in the mining production labour process. The paper argues that if the 2012 strike wave, Marikana and the recent tumult on the platinum mines - as well as its future - are to be better understood and explained, the character, role and struggles of the rock drill operators and their long-standing and occupationally distinct independent worker committees need to assume the focus of analysis.

Introduction

In August 2012 at Marikana² in the North West province of South Africa, 24,000 mineworkers were led out on strike by 3,000 rock drill operators at Lonmin Plc. In February of the same year, 5,000 rock drill operators at Impala Platinum Holdings Limited (Implats) had similarly led 18,000 workers out on strike. At Marikana, events

around the strike resulted in 44 deaths, 34 at the hands of the police. The other 10 deaths were policemen. What actually happened continues to receive considerable attention and is subject to the State appointed and ongoing Farlam Commission of Inquiry. Among the rapidly growing number of accounts attempting to grapple with what happened at Marikana, it has been argued that the historic role of the rock drill operators over a century, and the recognition of their independent committees over the past generation, is where any analysis needs to start (Stewart, 2013). It is regarding these issues that this paper elaborates.

This paper consequently details one moment in the occupational history of the rock drill operators, which deserves greater attention if recent events on the platinum mines are to be more adequately understood and explained. It tracks the post-strike issues that the rock drill operators faced after three legally unprotected strikes in 2004 on one platinum mine shaft in a major mining company. It traces their long-standing struggle with management back to 1985. At this shaft, in November 2004, over 400 rock drill operators were dismissed, but reemployed a week later at the behest of the unions of which they were members: the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Mouthpiece Workers Union (MPWU), the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) and even the staff association, the United Association of South Africa (UASA). The unions and the staff association signed a Collective Agreement that included mine management's stringent conditions for their re-employment. It describes how the rock drill operators won back their old wage rates, punitively cut by management after the third strike, by engaging in a productivity deal as the only option available to them. As has been argued elsewhere (Stewart, 2013), but is substantively demonstrated here in greater detail, only the occupational group of the rock drill operators possess the necessary objective power in the mining production labour process to define the rate at which mining extraction occurs. This is the source of their social power, which propelled them into the recent spotlight on the South African platinum mines.

The productivity deal in which the rock drill operators engaged after their third strike in 2004 shows how they are capable of achieving what one analyst argues needs to occur in South African mining. In the immediate post-Marikana analysis, an opinion piece that went viral, penned by a transformation and strategy consultant to

the mining industry, Gavin Hartford, argued that the mining industry finds itself “in the straight-jacket of having just one core competitive advantage, namely enhancing the productivity of the work team on the face to maximise the advance per blast, and the number of blasts in any shift cycle” (Hartford, 2013: 159). This paper shows how a group of rock drill operators did just that. The ‘one core competitive advantage’ for the mining industry turned out to be the route taken and realized by a group of rock drill operators after their 2004 strikes – their intensified exploitation notwithstanding.

In brief, the third and final strike of the rock drill operators in late November 2004 had been preceded by a strictly disciplined struggle over the length of the working day. The rock drill operators were working eight hours from bank to bank (surface to surface). The November strike, however, was triggered by annual leave having not been granted to rock drill operators, in some cases, for up to two years. After being dismissed and reemployed, they faced a situation in which they felt trebly punished. Their dismissal aside, the rock drill operators received a final written warning, had their wage rates cut to the level of novices and were required to win back the production lost due to the strike. In order to win back their old wage rates, the rock drill operators would have to intensify their work effort. In doing so they would encroach on what were previously purely managerial and supervisory prerogatives: specifying and winning a key production demand and ensuring that managerial systems stepped up organizational efficiencies. Underground, due to the central role they play in the stopes (where drilling and blasting takes place), *everyone* on the mineshaft would work harder.

The intention of this article is to examine how the rock drill operators found themselves in a bind after their third strike and how they won back the production lost as a result of this strike. After the strike they were all re-employed, but at the rates of novices. This meant the rock drill operators lost all increments won over their entire careers. To have their old wage rates restored senior mine management imposed three demands on the rock drill operators. Firstly, they would have to desist from their struggle for an eight-hour day ‘bank-to bank’ and return to working nine hours and twenty minutes per day. Secondly, days normally taken off – every second Saturday, Sundays and Public Holidays – had to be ‘worked in’ in order to win back the production lost due to the final strike. And thirdly, they would be subject to a ‘task team’ committee

representing trade unions, the staff association and management that would oversee the process. Only if these conditions were met, would the rock drill operators have their old wage rates restored.

The way this was achieved lies at the heart of what follows. The production lost during the strike amounted to around 125,000 man-hours. (Management on the shaft never revealed the *actual* amount of production lost – whether measured in cubic meters of ore mined, tons milled or ounces of refined platinum group metals). The number of extra shifts the whole workforce was to work was a subject of dispute, but it amounted to between 11 and 14 additional shifts for the entire workforce. Whether calculated in terms of labour time or actual production, the company clearly was intent on making it up, presumably to profit from the then rising price of platinum on the commodity resources market. The question is how the additional production was to be made up.

Dunbar Moodie has argued that, given the production cycle of supporting the overhanging rock followed by drilling and blasting, which dominates the round of the daily shifts in underground mining, “it is often impossible to make up time safely when conditions are bad” (Moodie, 1994: 72). Here Moodie is referring to poor geological, *physical* conditions underground. Making up time, by Moodie’s (1994) own general account of racialized, class-based social relations in production, when *social* conditions are bad, spells intractability. This was clearly the case on the platinum mine shaft after the 2004 strikes. In brief, as far as productivity is concerned, as will be seen, the trade unions had not been attending to the production demands of the rock drill operators, either by fighting for greater recognition of their skills or by ensuring that their rock drills were regularly maintained. This includes ensuring that that they had sufficient and sharp drill bits or that the pneumatic pressure to their drills was the 5kpa they preferred in order to ease the rigour of their daily work. This latter issue in particular was taken up in what subsequently occurred.

From a methodological point of view, all the information regarding the events was drawn from first-hand experience, the writer being the independent external facilitator who had access to company files and took over the chair of the task team - established after the strike to implement the Collective Agreement signed by the unions - after it had struck the impasse described below. On a terminological note, the rock drill operators (RDOs) are often

known simply as ‘the machine operators’. Both terms are used in this paper. Interestingly, the old term for this job - the Jack Hammer Hands (see Stewart, 2013) – was still used in then current company documentation. On a conceptual note, the term exploitation used here is interpreted formally and technically in the Marxist sense and is devoid of moral content. The rate of exploitation is measured by the ever-changing difference between the costs of labour and the net economic surplus or profit a capitalist enterprise makes. Simply put, when work is intensified by whatever means resulting in workers producing more, the rate of exploitation is increased or intensified.

Social Relations and Post-Strike Organization

In December 2004, a week after their mass dismissal, to get the rock drill operators back to work, the trade unions, as noted above – The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Mouthpiece Workers Union (MPWU), the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) and the staff association, United Association of South Africa (UASA) – negotiated a formal Collective Agreement on their behalf which amounted not to reinstatement, but rather reemployment at the rate of novices. One aspect of the Collective Agreement was a study of the working environment, particularly with regard to face utilisation (how, when and which rock faces were to be mined), the working time spent at the face and an examination of production ‘bottlenecks’ in the underground production process. In order to implement the Collective Agreement, the task team, comprised of representatives of management, the trade unions and the staff association, but not the rock drill operators’ committees, was then constituted.

In February 2005 the task team began to evaluate a wide range of issues. This task team was to report, in writing, to the General Manager on how the terms of the Collective Agreement were to be met. Once the lost production was made up, the Collective Agreement stated, senior management would address the issue of the rock drill operators’ cut wage rates. For the rock drillers, their old rates reflected hard-won increments, long-service and other increases (noted below), which had accrued over their working careers. With a significant number of these workers being in their forties and older, this loss, while never actually calculated during the events that transpired, clearly amounted to a considerable portion of the value of their labour power, which had accrued over their

working lives.

A major stumbling block the task team faced was that none of the trade unions, despite having signed them up as members, enjoyed the confidence of the rock drill operators whose loyalty lay with their own informal worker committees. Management refused to recognize the rock drill operators' committees in terms of a new Employee Relations policy, which had come into effect two years earlier. A compromise was struck that rock drill operators would elect their own representatives who would only have observer status on the task team. After intense negotiations, an agreement was made with the rock drill operators, via their 'observer representatives', that time lost due to the strike would be made up by way of working additional shifts. There was, however, continued concern within the task team that the rock drill operators would not honour agreements to work the days lost, signalling the degree of hesitancy within the trade union leadership ranks regarding the rock drillers on the shaft. The task team itself had not been fully 'recognized' by the informal rock drill operators' committee. The task team nevertheless devised a plan for the entire workforce to work the additional shifts on Saturdays and Public Holidays, which normally would have been taken off.

While management representatives on the task team consulted extensively regarding the calculations as to exactly how many shifts were to be worked, a deadlock threatened. In terms of the Collective Agreement, the full co-operation by *all* personnel and workers on the shaft was required for any arrangement to work the lost shifts. While the task team had succeeded in ensuring the rock drill operators' commitment to work the lost shifts, neither the general workforce, nor the supervisors, were prepared to cooperate. Neither trade union mass meetings nor communications by management secured the required commitment of the whole workforce to work any 'off' Saturdays or Public Holidays.

This refusal was due to events that had occurred during the strikes in which rock drill operators had physically assaulted other general workers who had refused to adhere to the 'strike law' they had tried to impose during their strikes. To have to work additional shifts on days normally taken off was perceived by other mineworkers as an exercise in 'assisting' the machine operators to win back their old, pre-strike wage-rates. The virtually exclusively white supervisory echelon similarly refused to work the lost shifts,

having had to forego their crucially important production bonuses for the month of December of the previous year due to the rock drill operators' strike.

Social Relations on the Shaft

Social analyses after Marikana revealed something of the extent of massive unplanned urbanization across the platinum belt and the predominance of un-serviced, self-built, tin shack-housing settlements surrounding many platinum mines (See Hartford, 2013; Chinguno, 2013). A study, conducted in the region around the shaft in 2004, concluded that the matter of housing was “generally ... ignored in companies public sustainability reports” with corporate social responsibility initiatives “having had little impact on the root causes of social problems surrounding the mines”, a senior manager confirming that “business activities... may be exacerbating social problems” (Hamann and Kapelus, 2004: 87-8).

In this context of violence and ‘no-go’ areas in the informal shack settlements immediately adjacent to the shaft, tensions were running high. Regarding inter-personal relations, generally: levels of trust were low, a culture of blame was endemic, charges of harassment, discrimination, victimization and ill-treatment had been made, and threats and actual manifestations of physical violence had occurred. No single social group involved in the conflict – management, unions, staff associations or rock drill operators – was immune to a broad ranging series of accusations levelled at one another across the shaft. The general workforce had become disenchanted and refused representatively formulated proposals for combined positive actions in the interests of resolution. The failure of the worker leadership at all levels to secure agreement to work the lost shifts was symptomatic of the depth of general antagonism and signalled the extent of the challenge in restoring ‘normality’.

Management, for instance, had been accused of discriminatory, racially-based favouritism, ignoring and failing to respond to issues raised for their attention by formally recognized trade union representatives and the independent and informal rock drill operator committees. The trade unions had been accused of being ineffective and inattentive to members' and rock drill operators' demands. Staff association members had been accused of racism, victimization and ill-treatment of black workers underground. The rock drill operators had been accused of disregarding fellow

workers, usurping unproductive forms of control over production and found guilty of illegal industrial strike action following threats and incidents of physical violence. The sullen 'silent majority' of general workers carried on work, but refused to help the rock drill operators.

The key issue, expressed generally by workers and by the rock drill operators in particular, was that they had no voice. This was reported by trade unionists themselves, despite high levels of trade union membership. Changes to rules and procedures, it was broadly alleged, were made without consultation and implemented without prior warning, resulting in disquiet, undue inconvenience and unsafe working conditions. Changes to the shaft schedule, for instance, resulted in inordinately long waiting times underground at the shaft stations. Applications for leave were not expedited, resulting in unnecessary domestic and social disruption. Material supply underground was considered poor, resulting in conflict between supervisors and the rock drill operators. Further supply chain dysfunctions were reported to be acute: safety-threatening practices of improvisation ('planisa') had apparently exceeded 'normal' mining practice (Phakathi, 2002). Day shift preparation for night shift was inadequate, resulting in instances of serious delays in drilling starting times with the consequent extension of the working day - late exit to surface, twelve hour shifts and more. Overtime for late shifts was not always paid, thereby devaluing workers' labour time. Workers were being disciplined for short shifts, even if the job had been completed and permission granted from the miner responsible to leave working places. Wage incentive payments could not readily be calculated. Based on workers' experience, the number of shifts worked and the number of metres advanced at the face, did not translate into anticipated remuneration received in pay packets. It was strongly felt that calculations did not make sense; Drilling bonuses were either paid late or not at all and were unpredictable. Issues relating to bonuses, incidentally, have long been little understood by team leaders, let alone by workers (Leger, 1985: 54-62).

In addition, there were grumbles that the rock drill operators' wages were too low and this was an ongoing issue, only to surface dramatically and violently in the strike wave in 2012. Promotions and appointments, a generalized complaint (See Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu 2007: 252), were considered one-sided, insofar as they

were perceived to be discriminatory towards workers with long service who had been in ‘acting’ positions. Race was asserted as the primary criterion for promotion and advancement, both on surface and underground, thereby confirming the current research in mining at the time (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu: 2007: 252). The harassment and victimization of black union leaders by white supervisors was strongly expressed – the relationship between supervisors and workers having long-been a fraught one (Leger and van Niekerk 1986), born of the ‘steel divide of race’ of over a century before (Harries, 1994: 126). Leave, for instance, was said to be refused, particularly to black shaft-steward union leaders. The ill-treatment of workers underground was often asserted through being subject to shouting and swearing. The issue of not being granted leave was said to have been a strong contributory factor to the strikes the year before as it was in violation of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) of 1997, which requires that annual leave must be taken after 12 months continual service. ‘Family responsibility’ leave was periodically not granted, resulting in distress and unhappiness. ‘Knocking-off’ late, representing further un-paid labour time, emerged as an issue contributing to general worker dissatisfaction.

While these issues were being addressed, the task team also faced pressure from the rock drill operators, who wanted to be paid after each shift to be made up, and from the General Manager wanted action from the task team. Despite all this, the bitter irony was that the shaft continued to boast one of the best production records at the company. This was clearly a very competent and hard-working mining community.

The Background to the Rock Drill Operators’ Struggle

During the 2012 strike wave on South African platinum mines and especially at Marikana, the rock drill operators and their worker committees shot to public prominence. What is less known is that the occupationally specific rock drill operators’ worker committees had been negotiating directly with management, albeit intermittently, since 1985, often without any trade union accompanying them.

Nearly thirty years ago, when two-handed drilling was the norm, the rock drill operator (the ‘jack’) and their assistants (the ‘hammer’) were on level 5 of the standard South African mining industry Patterson grading system, instituted in the 1960’s when the

'maximum average' system came to an end (Moodie, 2005: 547). They were upgraded to level 6 or 7 in 1985 depending on whether the most recent version of the 'lightweight drill' was being used. The newer, modified lightweight rock drill saw negotiations elevate the job to level 8 three years later in 1988. In addition to regular drilling bonuses, this change in wage scale was accompanied by 80% of rock drillers' assistants' production bonus (later negotiated to 100%) in exchange for drilling without an assistant or one-handed. In exchange for doing *two* jobs, the machine operator took over the bonus, but not the wage, of his erstwhile assistant. One-handed drilling was clearly implemented irregularly on the platinum belt (and never encountered by this writer in gold mining) as rock drill operators raised it decades later as an issue during the 2012 strike wave.

Subsequent increases to the rock drill operators' production bonus, one being in March of 1992, were implemented, particularly in situations with narrow stope-widths and uncomfortable and difficult rock breaking conditions underground. Mining low stope-widths requires both skill and a significant degree of personal commitment as the space within which work takes place is more cramped and uncomfortable the narrower the stope-width (the stope-width must be understood as the 'height' of the stope - from 'footwall' (floor) to 'hanging wall' (roof)). This increase in the production bonus appears to have occurred without trade union intervention when wages were increased. This occurred at a time when the mining company prided itself in being the best paying mine in the area. This bonus increased a further 8% a year later.

Sometime later, the mining company signalled that, while it continued to be the best paying mine in the area, it was nevertheless willing to meet a delegation of rock drill operators, with the proviso that no meetings would be granted under the threat of industrial action. One result was the installation of additional compressors to increase air pressure to the rock drills - an old complaint. This occurred again, as a result of rock drill operators' production demands, in 2004. Increasing the pneumatic pressure to the rock drills permits a decrease in the time taken to drill, thereby improving productivity. In the same year, 1995, the drilling bonus was increased by a further 8% and an additional 3% adjustment was made in line with that year's wage negotiations. However, this was not enough to prevent matters from eventually culminating in

the entire occupational group of 3616 machine operators across the company going out on a legally unprotected strike in 1999. The strike demand of the machine operators - to be raised to level 12 of the wage scale - was not met. An agreement signed, now between the mining company and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) brought these matters temporarily to a close.

In 1999 it was noted that teamwork and ‘meters drilled per operator per shift’ impacted on the bonuses awarded. The measure of ‘meters drilled per operator per shift’ (i.e. face advance) was, however, to become the basis for the new negotiated targets to improve overall face advance per mining section in order to resolve the impasse faced after the annual leave strikes in 2004. It was in the strike year of 1999 that the scenario regarding the rock drill operator issues points towards the events of 2004 and into the present. Continued general dissatisfaction with their work situation - directed at both management and the unions - and the locally growing profile of their company-wide informal committees, who often held their meetings under the scrubby thorn trees of the bush *veld* around the mines, reminiscent of the Marikana workers congregating on a large rocky outcrop - ‘the mountain’ - in August 2012, had led to the more direct involvement of a then fairly recently established union prepared to take up their cause. The Mouthpiece Workers Union (MPWU) was initiated and began to articulate their concerns.

Within the federation of COSATU, within which the NUM was the largest affiliate and many of these rock drill operators were members, acknowledgements were made that political issues had overshadowed traditional trade union issues: “We were not focusing on improving production, the quality of production... We were not making demands around production” (Buhlungu, 2000: 81). This continues into the present and lay at the root of rock drill operator dissatisfaction and their initiation of the 2012 strikes, this time with another new union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) initially (and seemingly continuing to) uneasily represent the rock drill operators (See Sunday Times, Business Times 19 January 2014, p4).

The production demands of the machine operators regarded not only the drilling bonuses and their calculation, but also proposals to increase their wage scale to level 14, be remunerated the salaries (not just the bonuses) of their erstwhile assistant ‘hammers’, and a re-evaluation of the job description of the machine operators on the

wage band scales. The demands made by the rock drill operators - and the MPWU most visibly representing them at the time - were not met by management. Much like in 2012 and into the present, trade union rivalry across the mining industry at the time was intense and spilled over into violence, epitomized by the tragic death of an NUM organizer, Selby Mayize (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2007).

Recent Events

The mining company concerned made a concerted attempt to address the 1999 violence on the platinum belt by way of starting to negotiate a fully-fledged Employee Relations (ER) policy. The independent rock drill operator committees, established across the company, were officially excluded and not institutionally included in the ER policy, which, after much negotiation, was signed-off by all the trade unions, staff associations and management 'stakeholders' three years later in 2002. It is now clear, however, that the rock drill operators' worker committees remained alive, at least in spirit, only to resurface again in 2004 and in 2012 in full force.

In 2004 it was only at the shaft in question that a rock drill operator committee, previously organized across the company (including a 'Central Committee'), re-appeared. It was led by a charismatic worker on the shaft who was the chairperson of the previous company-wide 'Central Committee' of the rock drill operators' committees. The workers committee became 'more visible' in March of that year, in fact 'very visible' according to the human resources manager. The rock drill operators would congregate outside the gates of the shaft. Once underground they started working a strict eight-hour day.

The continuation of these informal workers' committees outside the new formal ER arrangements constituted, from the point of view of management, the trade unions, and many workers, a disruptive role in production as the machine operators articulated their specific demands and ultimately manifested itself in the three strikes that year and their subsequent dismissal. Given the shift to the restoration of managerial authoritarianism through subcontracting within the industry, the erosion of internal trade union democracy, emerging divisions within the NUM due to a variety of factors (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2007), and the resulting lack of focus on the shop floor, the rock drill operators clearly sought other avenues to advance their production and workplace-based demands. This

would, of course, burst out into the open and much more broadly in 2012, which remains in evidence on the platinum belt.

Trade Union Affiliation as at November 2004

The focus on the changing job descriptions of the rock drill operator to one-handed drilling, partly motivated by management as a result of the introduction of the new lightweight drill, applies specifically to the rock drill operators in the stopes. The occupational category of rock drill operator was comprised of the following job roles and their numerical strengths at the time of the November 2004 strike action at the shaft:

Table 1: Machine Operator Bargaining Unit

Lightweight Stope Machine Operator	246
Developing Machine Operator	137
Drill Rig Operator	12
Miscellaneous related occupations	15
Total Number of machine operators	410

Source: Company records, 2005

These figures indicate the numerical significance of the lightweight stope machine operators who represent 60% of the machine operator bargaining unit. It was this particular group on which attention was primarily focused in both the work of the task team in their attempts to overcome the impasse, for it was these workers who had been central in alienating both their fellow workers as well as the supervisors in their over two decade-long struggle at the company.

The following table indicates the relative trade union strengths in the machine operator bargaining unit on the shaft:

Table 2: Worker organization and membership in percentages

MPWU	204	50
NUM	125	30
CUSA	11	2.6
UASA	2	0.4
Unaffiliated	68	17
Total	410	100

Source: Company records, 2005

Trade union representation among the rock drill operators as a whole was over 80%. Among the lightweight stope machine operators, the MPWU topped the 50% mark. The NUM held 30% of their allegiance, while 17% remained unaffiliated.

There is a significant consequence of these figures. Firstly, prior to the signing of the Employee Relations policy in 2002, company documentation reveals that the rock drill operators had been able to elect a delegation of ten workers to negotiate directly with management. These elected workers were later accompanied by their MPWU representatives and wanted this practise reinstated. The ER policy of 2002, as well as the Collective Agreement of December 2004, expressly precluded a return to this form of direct representation. It was clear from the outset of the external intervention facilitation process, which started in June 2005, that the rock drill operators were not in favour of electing two of their number with observer status on the task team, for instance, one NUM delegate and one 'Alliance' (MPWU and CUSA) delegate. They felt this would divide their strength, but ultimately compromised on this issue, as noted above. Their compromise, however, was not without mutterings and masked a substantive threat.

In the wake of the rest of those on the shaft refusing to work additional shifts, the rock drill operators began to threaten to all take their leave on the same day they had been reemployed the previous year. They were taking advantage of their knowledge that the new centralized computer system specified that annual leave was to be taken exactly one year after the date of employment. The rock drill operators were effectively threatening the company with what would have been an unprecedented form of legal 'strike', all having been signed up on the same day after the November 2004 strike. With the shaft at an impasse, the task team requested external intervention.

External intervention

With an external facilitator in place, a series of meetings took place with the task team, which had become known as 'the machine operators' task team'. These meetings were marked by intensive discussion on matters of representation, full acceptance of the ER policy and access to more extensive documentation from management was secured. The compromise of the two rock drill operator 'observer representatives' was negotiated. The overall objectives were set to 'normalize' working relations, secure

full agreement to work in lost shifts and move towards realizing senior management's concern to 'improve' conditions on the shaft, as management expressed it, 'technically, organizationally and culturally'. The key objective was to recover financial losses of the company, the supervisors, the general workers and the rock drill operators lost wages in order to attenuate the deeply-seated antagonism on the shaft resulting from the previous year's strikes. Meanwhile, the rest of the workers, artisans and supervisors on the shaft stood firm in refusing to sacrifice valuable leisure time 'saving' the rock drill operators. A key intention in the Collective Agreement was to ensure the regularization of both production matters and the social consequences of the strike. As noted, the machine operators continued to work for strictly eight hours 'bank-to-bank'. Where individual machine operators did not follow this practice, they were heavily fined by having to purchase meat for a large *braai* (traditional grilling of meat) or what became known as 'ox fines'. An ox would cost around double (R3000) a rock drill operators' monthly wage (R1500). To ensure disciplinary control within their ranks, the committees had turned dissident actions at the point of production into a feast of a social occasion, much to the continued chagrin of the rest of the shaft.

At the heart of resolving these issues, including management's concern over the practice of rock drill operators committees fining their members the price of an ox, lay the matter of the pay rates forfeited as a result of the strike. The machine operators' issue of their annual leave took immediate precedence. The combination of collective fatigue on the part of the operators, of which a significant proportion were due for annual leave, and their continued threat to all take leave on the same day, ensured it assumed the highest priority. After a process of clarification on the technical issues and calculations, negotiations over the Holiday Leave Allowance (HLA) resulted in a leave roster being drawn up and the rock drill operators began to take their overdue leave. Meanwhile the General Manager was pressing for progress from the task team and the rock drill operators were, by July 2005, becoming increasingly impatient about still working at the rate of novices.

Machine Operators' Pay Rates and the Productivity Deal

The burning issue of the pay rates assumed increasing importance. Working-in additional shifts was out of the question.

A decision to focus on the measure of face advance emerged. This is the measure of how deep into the rock face shot holes are drilled with each drill and blasting cycle, a single such cycle being the goal of every shift, a daily blast long having been the measure of the task for a day's work underground. After much discussion, calculation and formal presentations at task team meetings by managers from the Survey and Rock Mechanics Departments, focusing on face advance signalled a way forward out of the impasse. The rock drill operators' regular mass meetings, kept informed blow-by-blow, concurred with the strategy.

What amounted to a productivity agreement was proposed and submitted to the General Manager. Increasing face advance was under the direct control of the rock drill operators who agreed to suspend their struggle over the length of the working day. The mass meetings of the rock drill operators accepted this as necessary to maximise face time (direct labour time at the rock face). Face utilisation (how and which rock faces were to be worked and coordinated) received attention at management level in terms of the overall mine plan and the issue of production 'bottlenecks' and other production related issues were addressed. The *production demands* of workers were finally receiving attention (Stewart, 2010).

A second, more detailed Memorandum was crafted and accepted by the General Manager. This second Memorandum, dated 26 August 2005, had two key 'milestones' to be achieved. These were summarized as follows in a company document to the task team:

1/2m face advance above target per month will be achieved for two consecutive months, Sept/Oct 2005. Pay rates will be reinstated from 1 September. If this is not achieved no pay rate adjustment will occur and the shifts to be worked in still to be negotiated as per the Collective Agreement. 1m face advance per month will be achieved above target on measuring day, 20 Sept 2005 and maintained through to December 2005 and the 2004 pay rates will be reinstated from 1 Sept and the working-in arrangements falls away. If 1m face advance per month from Sept-Dec is not achieved, working-in arrangements will be scheduled for 2006.

The Memorandum was signed off and to be implemented on 20 August at the beginning of the new measuring month. Notices were posted in the hostels, in the lamp room and at the entrances to both of the shafts.

Implementation Initiatives

A series of technical, organizational and personnel issues needed to be confronted and monitored if the face advance initiative was to succeed. This involved the trade union task team members in face-to-face engagements with individual senior underground supervisors - the mine overseers - directly challenging them insofar as it required changes to their routines. Importantly, the mine overseers attended task team meetings during this period. These were the selfsame men who had lost their Christmas bonus the previous December and had refused to assist the rock drill operators to win back their lost wage rates. A series of underground visits, allocating task team members to individual mine overseers, men with considerably more knowledge of production and mining, were to prove instructive for the unionists, for they were a radical intervention in changing social relations in production itself. Task team trade union representatives allocated themselves to the various mine overseers into teams of two for the monitoring exercise. The two ranks of men facing each other perfectly mirrored their respective racial groups. The text could not have been clearer: black trade unionists were to 'monitor' white supervisory mine overseers.

Unaccustomed and reluctant to subject themselves to the rigours and temporal discipline of reporting underground on a daily basis the trade unionists only conducted 20 out of a potential 160 visits, which could have greatly facilitated task team and mine overseer and general co-operation. The trade unionists were not up to the task, confirming the dim view the supervisors in general and the mine overseers, in particular, had of them. The notable exceptions were immediately spotted by management and identified for individual 'grooming' and mentoring with a view of promotion up the ranks of the company. As the literature has shown regarding the "the position of the shop steward" ... this layer of union leadership is a popular recruiting ground for management in the industry" (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2007: 251).

Level Control Monitoring

A particular concern raised by the trade unionists was the number of workers being turned back at the shaft due to late arrival. This complaint, expressed by their worker constituency, was not conducive to achieving the new face advances. Arguments were presented that most often the reasons for lateness were genuinely beyond the control of the men. It was often due to the bus transporting underground mine personnel not arriving on time. These matters were solidly within the range of their experience, as opposed to the tougher production details - management's traditional prerogative - they were unable or unwilling, in the main, to tackle. An agreement was reached to monitor the extent of this occurrence.

While the number of lost man-shifts 'saved' as a result of this exercise was not especially significant overall, the exercise pointed to the attempt by trade unionists to ensure the success of the agreement. The labour time 'saved' in this manner amounted to around 1360 'man hours'. The unionists were particularly proud of this initiative, for it had a direct impact on assuaging some of the frustration of their worker constituencies. It represented a rare engagement of trade unionists - as opposed to the staff association - involving themselves directly in production issues.

The Section Manager's 'War Rooms'

The General Manager brought the underground supervisory chain of command directly under senior shaft management control. This involved daily meetings in the section manager's office. These meetings were dedicated to ensuring closer supervision and the reporting of a variety of factors relating to production. This can be analysed in a number of ways, yet its impact was an important component of the success of the increased face advances that took place over the months of September through to December 2005.

Underground, at the waiting places (normally close to the entrances of the stopes), the charts designed to track face advance, lost blasts and related measures were found to not have been either consistently applied or regularly completed. Not all underground supervisors were sufficiently familiar with the process which permitted for more careful monitoring of the underground stoping environment than had previously occurred.

What transpired confirms an analysis of how South African trade unions are continually required to face the post-democratic

transition, from militant mobilization to an engagement with the realities of a considerably more complex democratic society, if real material gains for workers are to be made. For as Sakhela Buhlungu (2000) had argued a few years before:

Unions do not have the skills to engage in complex discussions about shop-floor issues, let alone broader economic and political issues. With many companies embarking on restructuring, particularly on the shop-floor, the need for union engagement is likely to become greater.... The shop stewards' committee and the members' general meeting were very effective in the era of resistance, but they were never geared to deal with production issues. This weakness was exposed when management came up with new initiatives which required workers and shop stewards to take a clear stand on issues such as productivity and the need to become globally competitive (Buhlungu 2000: 83).

Very largely confirming Buhlungu's analysis, despite the productivity exercise being in the immediate direct interest of the powerful, though fractious constituency of the rock drill operators, many task team members felt they had been compelled to engage in the process and often did so somewhat reluctantly.

Achieving and Assessing Improved Face Advance

Without going into the details of the 'productivity deal', face advances improved significantly. A 14% improvement in meeting mine plan targets occurred over an eight-month period. This was due to the collective efforts of the key parties: the rock drill operators themselves, the daily 'War Room' meetings at 7am in the section manager's office and even the limited underground visits of the task team dedicated to investigating trouble spots at the stope faces. These crucial developments led to the reinstatement of the machine operators' forfeited wage rates, but not the wages lost between December 2004 and the date of reinstatement of the old wage rates on 1 September 2005. The reason for this was what did not change, but cannot be addressed here: the rock drill operators' silent refusal to adhere to their official job description. In brief, no-one was prepared to face off against the rock drill operators who clearly had, over time, won the practice of defining their own job

as strictly drilling the rock face and who had effectively established themselves as ‘kings of the mine’ (see Stewart, 2013). The *de facto* power of the machine operators at the point of production had enabled them to slough off aspects of their job to other underground workers - thereby impacting on the social relations between them and those who had long since taken over these parts of their job. At this point the work of the task team at the shaft, the external intervention facilitation process and the successful completion of the terms of the second Memorandum, effectively stalled.

Conclusion

In 2004, over 400 rock drill operators on one shaft at PGM went out on strike three times as they struggled to force their legal right to take badly overdue annual leave. Management had not listened to them, neither had any of the trade unions taken them seriously. Social relations had deteriorated badly. Prior to their strikes, these rock drill operators had first resuscitated their own organic and informal worker committees on the shaft and had embarked on symbolic protests at the gates of the mine. Then they began closing off their drills exactly eight hours after they had clocked in at the crush, only to go and wait at the shaft stations for the hoist to take them to surface at the normal time. Yet, production at the shaft not only continued throughout, but was in fact, one of the mining company’s best performing shafts. None of these strategies afforded them the relief they sought. Arguably, the rock drill operators held the moral high ground but lost it as well as any support they may have had from their fellow workers during their third strike in November 2004, once having taken to violence. Within their own ranks they enforced their strike law by holding celebratory cultural feasts, funded by fines paid by recalcitrant members for having dissented with what were either genuine majority decisions or the dictates of a powerful, charismatic leader. Whatever the case, there is no doubt as to the display of the rock drill operators collective organizational discipline. Once dismissed and rehired under the threat of final dismissal, their trade union representatives in the task team failed them in not being able to resolve their issues. They then turned to tactical options by having found a bureaucratic loophole, threatening to all take annual leave on the same day a year after their mass re-employment and to which they would have been legally entitled.

An outside party crafted a way out of the impasse in which the whole shaft found itself, the impasse being related directly to the objective power at the point of production exercised by the occupational group of the rock drill operators. However, this solution required of them not only to cease using their objective power in production as a weapon to reduce the length of the working day, as well as the intensification of the application of their labour power, the only capacity left to them. They proved themselves up to the task. Yet production was no longer the issue, but power. While the restoration of managerial disciplinary power had been asserted - through getting the machine operators to both suspend their working time struggle and by intensifying their working day - subjectively the rock drill operators felt they had won a victory by winning back their old wage rates, the increased intensity of work required notwithstanding. 'Normality' had been restored, working lives continued much as before and as is now clear, the workers committees went underground.

The rock drill operators' strategic position in the underground mining labour process constituted the material basis for their actions. No other single occupational group on the shaft - or on any mine for that matter - would have been capable of waging the struggle they did. Firstly, their very position in production fostered the creation of the occupationally specific workers' committees. They subsequently took time out to reorganize and re-establish their own organic working class form of organization, albeit only on the shaft and not across the company as previously had been the case prior to the major managerial intervention by way of the new Employee Relations policy. After the strike, incidentally, an astute management had taken evasive action to prevent further mobilization of these worker committees by conducting sessions on the ER policy at all of the other shafts in the mine complex. Secondly, during their struggle, the rock drill operators had embarked on symbolic protest action, but opted for a tactical retreat, on more than one occasion, when faced with the mine manager's threat to dismiss them. They then survived two legally unprotected strikes and despite being dismissed after the third strike, were reemployed thanks to trade union intervention. Finally, once constrained by a post-strike, final written warning, they managed to intensify their working day by increasing the critical productivity measure of face advance, thereby winning back their lost wage rates. In short, the rock drill operators,

directly via the organization of their committees, showed how they could exercise their power over production by increasing the productivity of the shaft as a whole.

The paradox was that during the face advance productivity deal the 400 rock drill operators, by intensifying their labouring efforts, contributed anew to their own exploitation, formally speaking. Yet, the face advance project was an important moment for the rock drill operators on the shaft. For they stood to lose the earnings built up over their entire careers, having been reduced to working at the wage rate of a novice. In essence they were fighting the rock to win back their lost wage rates. To do this they had to win back lost labour time. They clearly threw themselves with unbridled gusto into the 'productivity deal', for the sake of their very careers as miners, represented by the sum total of their life's labour time expenditure, depended on its success. Such was their enthusiasm that their injury rate spiked in the first month of the project. This is a critical part of the story that unfortunately cannot be told here.

The lesson of the rock drill operators' history and struggle appears sufficiently clear. In short, the workers who play this central role in mining production can no longer be ignored. This role has been hidden, only to have burst into public sight in the 2012 strike wave and the events of Marikana in which they certainly played the leading role, at least initially, in the major strikes at Implats in February and at Lonmin in August. There is evidence emerging that other occupational groups have taken their lead from the rock drill operators.

The evidence presented here points to not only the hitherto unrecognized existence of their committees going back thirty years, but also to their ambiguous independence from their own trade unions - both in the past and recent present. Neither the trade unions, nor the industry can continue to ignore the central role they play in production, which was the basis for propelling these workers to taking action on surface which drew the fire of the state.

Over 3,600 rock drill operators went out alone on strike in 1996 as did 400 in 2004. Over 5,000 rock drill operators did so in 2012 and later that year the actions of 3,000 rock drill operators at Lonmin at Marikana in 2012 broke out on surface. On these occasions they took other workers out on strike with them, which both revealed the living conditions of many workers on the platinum belt and had devastating consequences. It is perhaps to be noted that

the very next month in September 2012 workers independently spearheaded the strikes which broke out at Anglo American Platinum (Amplats). Emerging research suggests groups of winch drivers, as well as groups of rock drill operators, initiated the various actions on different shafts (Sinwell 2014).

Whatever the case, without positively engaging with the rock drill operators as a distinct occupational group and other groups of workers, who may, it appears, be following their lead, any initiatives undertaken to normalize social antagonisms on the platinum belt, whether by the mining industry, the state, or organized labour, may well founder. It is time the crucial productive role of the rock drill operators, their production demands and some form of recognition of their committees is taken seriously. No 'normal' industrial relations scenario will be possible, the evidence presented in this paper suggests, until such time the collective voice of the rock drill operators is heard and a meaningful response provided.

Endnotes

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2. Four books have already appeared on Marikana. One account specifically deals with the event; Alexander P, Legkowa T, Mmope B, Sinwell L and Xeswi B (2012) *Marikana: A view from the mountain and a case to answer*, Jacana, Johannesburg. A broader analysis of mining contextualizes the event: Frankel P, *Between the Rainbows and the Rain: Marikana, migration, mining and the crisis of modern South Africa*, Agency for Social Reconstruction, Johannesburg. A book of poetry tries to come to terms with it; d'Abdon R (ed) *Marikana: a moment in time*, Geko Publishing, Johannesburg. The fourth book is an illustrated exercise in investigative journalism; Jika T, Mosamo S, Sadika L, Saba A, Dlangamandla F and Ledwaba L (2013), *We are Going to Kill Each Other Today: The Marikana Story*, Tafelberg, Cape Town. A fifth book, the provisional title of which describes its content, *The 2012 Platinum Belt Strike Wave: The Rise and Decline of Working Class Hegemony*, by Luke Sinwell, is currently underway.

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