

Labour Unrest

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The labour unrest that has plagued the South African mining industry since 2012 is still ongoing, with the majority of the conflict being centred on the platinum sector. So we as an industry and a nation are still on a slow walk to defining a new set of 'rules of the game' that I have described in previous commentaries.

However, the most recent development, the establishment of a Platinum Sector Peace and Stability Accord, is a significant step forward.

The agreement between government, mining houses, and labour is aimed at bringing an end to the turmoil in South Africa's platinum sector. The parties have undertaken to denounce violence, intimidation, and lack of respect for life and property; and to call for respect for the laws of the country and tolerance of different views. Concurrently, there was a call on workers to refrain from violence, intimidation, illegal gatherings, and strikes. Critically, the agreement forbids the carrying of weapons on mining property.

The accord has created a subset of rules through which future negotiations and inevitable conflict may be managed, hopefully, without the re-emergence of violence and property destruction. The parties to the accord have agreed to set up structures, processes, and timeframes to implement the objectives of the agreement.

A critical question in many people's minds is that with all major stakeholders now signatories to the agreement, is this a return to normality in the platinum sector and, by example, in the rest of Industry? As a pragmatist coloured by a fundamental belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, my answer is yes. However, I still believe the timeline will be protracted but that we are, slowly and steadily, moving in the right direction.

I was recently party to a process associated with the implementation of the Peace Accord, and left feeling that, despite some grandstanding, the overall process was a positive step in the right direction. What struck me was that regardless of affiliation – labour, government, or business – or the different style of message delivery, there was a common desire for peace, order, and stability – a real desire for a return to civil society. There was an eagerness to return to normality while acknowledging that 'normal' would not be the way things were in the past. There was absolutely no desire to cripple an industry, but rather an acknowledgement that we need to move forward in a new way, but with no clarity as to what the new way would be.

So the next question is 'will the Platinum Peace Accord be enough'? Intuitively, no – it took an inclusive process with significant give and take from both sides, CODESA, to move South Africa out of deadlock into our new democracy. My feeling is that we need an inclusive multi-stakeholder process to resolve a national challenge which is manifesting in the mining industry. This is not a platinum issue, not even an Industry issue, but rather a national matter around meeting the expectations of the nation coupled with clarification and acceptance of the roles of the different players – government, business, and labour. The journey continues.