

# Book review

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Luke Sinwell with Sipiwe Mbatha, *The spirit of Marikana: the rise of insurgent trade unionism in South Africa*

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*Title: The spirit of Marikana: the rise of insurgent trade unionism in South Africa*

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*Despite its title, this book does not look exclusively at the massacre that occurred at Marikana on 16 August 2012, when South African police officers shot and killed 34 striking mineworkers and wounded 78 others. Rather, it places that event in the context of a longer, larger struggle for dignity and economic freedom by the working class in South Africa. The authors did not do this to trivialise this significant event but to implore the reader to recognise that it was one moment, one particular incident in a long history of struggle and conflict, one that is not necessarily more important than another. As such, it pursues what George Lipsitz has called the 'long fetch', looking into the past and identifying the forces that slowly shaped what may otherwise appear to have been sudden and inexplicable.<sup>1</sup> The book does this by attempting to describe the tensions between the various 'ordinary' individuals – the striking employees of Lonmin's platinum mine at Marikana – and their relationships to the labour collectives they started, helped lead, or held to account. It attempts to show how understanding these tensions is crucial to understanding the events that occurred at Marikana, and understanding South Africa as an economic project.*

One must be careful not to overstate the importance of the Marikana massacre and events discussed in this book, as the lessons and memories of them infuse the ongoing protests at South African university campuses with protesting students demanding *free*,

*quality, decolonised* education. This book not only tells the stories of the *how* and the *why* of the platinum belt strikes that started in 2012, and the associated responses by the police, government and mining companies that culminated in the Marikana Massacre. It also serves as a guide to others involved in these labour struggles by explaining protest tactics and positions taken, victories won and ongoing battles still being fought. It gives life to

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sociological theory, helping us better understand present and future working class struggles; the book, and lessons contained in it, possibly progressively shaping their outcomes. The book is a historical document that carefully shares the testimony of people who were protest organisers, who were on the ground when the events at Marikana were unfolding, and who were central to its story. For this contribution, we and future South Africans must be forever grateful.

Reading this book reminded me of a book taught in first-year sociology classes at UCT: Robert Michels's *Iron law of oligarchy*. In this book, Michels suggests that, regardless the state of democratic organisations when started, all complex organisations are eventually ruled by a few elite individuals – they all eventually develop into oligarchies. By describing the manner in which one of the two main labour unions at Marikana, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), had become separated from the control of the workers it was meant to serve, the book hints at the replication of Michels's iron law. However, in describing the emergence and influence of independent worker committees, the second major union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), and the manner in which workers demanded their collective voice be their mandate rather than being dictated to by their union, the book serves as a possible counter-example to the 'iron' law. Perhaps, rather, the book begs us to ask whether in the struggles of workers there is in fact an iron law of democracy, one that shows workers will always and ultimately demand that their voices are heard.

Not only are the powerful collective voices of South Africa's platinum miners heard through this book, but, most importantly, so are the stories of the individuals who experienced the ongoing injustices of working conditions described on the mines. When these individual mineworkers spoke of their experiences with

those around them and found their lives to be similarly painful; they discussed what they felt was a justified wage for the work they did and, as the authors write, began a rallying cry for economic freedom and basic dignity. Each worker presented in the book has their backstory sensitively told in a way that exposes the effects of the presence of the past. This includes how the apartheid-reinforced migrant labour system still affects the daily lives of mineworkers, and serves to give the characters in the story a dignity and fullness that merely recounting the facts might not.

The book is composed of an extensive yet vital preliminary section, followed by a lengthy introductory chapter and five more chapters, chronologically detailing the events leading up to the 12 August massacre at Marikana and the subsequent strike, the longest in South African mining history.

The preliminary section introduces the key players making up the political landscape of South Africa. It also contains a list of the various leaders, formal and informal, discussed in the book. I found this very helpful as it can be difficult to keep track of the many individuals quoted and discussed. Perhaps most importantly, this section contains a timeline of key events that provides a helpful and clear overview of the big picture, and some appropriate maps, up front.

The introduction positions the reader by explaining the theoretical frameworks through which the authors navigate the stories. The authors use Antonio Gramsci's analysis of emergent trade unions and his concept of 'organic intellectuals' to explain the events at Marikana. Gramsci's work is particularly relevant in this case because the emergent leadership of those involved in the worker committees showed intellectual insights into their lives and working conditions. They were not intellectuals in any formal sense – but when the opportunity presented itself, these 'ordinary' workers offered

a counter narrative that successfully challenged the hegemony they experienced and inspired mass participation.

Chapter 2 describes the origins of the worker committees at the mines and tells the important story of how the demand for a living wage of R12 500 was conceptualised. It weaves together the individual stories of the workers who were working at Lonmin mine and how they together started the discussion over wages, giving the chapter its title 'The spark underground'. The authors emphasise that movements such as those at Marikana don't 'just' happen, that coming together in such a show of conviction requires unity and the persuasion of others to the validity of a particular course of action. The chapter also details the growing dissatisfaction with the dominant union at the time – the NUM – and how many suspected it had become a so-called 'pocket union', that it was too close to mine management and government, and was not taking the interests of the workers forward. It was due to this dissatisfaction and the need for proper worker control over their politics and formalised demands that the committees became stronger until Lonmin was forced to engage.

Chapter 3 deals with the strike at Lonmin, which led to the Marikana massacre, and the stubborn continued struggle, in spite of the violence meted out against the miners. It first describes how Lonmin had failed to adequately address the concerns of the well-organised miners. It illustrates how this led workers to promise that they would continue fighting for what they believed was a legitimate living wage. The chapter discusses the fear and betrayal the miners felt when they embarked on their unprotected strike and the ever-growing antagonism toward the NUM, which seemed further away than ever from the workers it was meant to be representing. The book only briefly discusses some of the violence around

this period, and touches on the massacre itself without going into a lot of detail. The authors point out early on that the aim of the book is not to advance a sociological argument regarding the massacre itself and implore readers to search elsewhere for a deeper knowledge regarding what exactly happened. However, the authors do explore how the massacre failed to break the workers' unity. Rather, worker unity was strengthened by the widespread public condemnation of the massacre, as well as by the arrival in Marikana of several left-wing groups, the Democratic Left Front (DLF) and others, to support the post-massacre worker struggles. The chapter ends with the striking workers agreeing with mine management to a wage increase far lower than that which they had demanded.

Chapter 4 details the history of the unprotected strike at Amplats mine, another large mining company operating in the North West province of South Africa. It explains the history of the simmering unhappiness among workers there, and concludes that all that was needed for the workers to engage in a strike was one final push. The Marikana massacre and continued strength of the workers at Lonmin proved to be that final push. Much like earlier in the book, the authors detail how the demanded wage of R16 070 by the individual miners was conceived. They were individuals who sought a better world for themselves, their families and future generations, who also found support in independently organised worker committees after feeling disillusioned with the NUM. The chapter talks about a unity built out of the failure of the NUM. The strike was very specifically non-unionised and in spite of the reaction of Amplats management, which fired 12 000 workers, the strike continued. Zwelinzima Vavi, the leader of South Africa's largest trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), is described as becoming sympathetic to the striking workers after meeting them. As a result, he negotiated on their behalf

with mine management, but never outside the mandate of the workers. The strike was settled, but a bigger, longer strike was yet to come.

Chapter 5 looks at the transition from informal to formal ways of organising, how worker committees became a legal, legitimate part of the AMCU. After the unprotected strikes had ended it was necessary to formalise the manner in which negotiations were conducted with mine management, hence the decision that a union was needed to represent the workers. The authors explain the complex set of events that eventually led to the AMCU being that union. There were workers who wanted to stay outside any unions and remain militant, while the AMCU also feared the power of the independent worker committees. There were, the authors suggest, issues of mistrust among workers and leaders, with power struggles in the AMCU leading many to fear that it might be corrupted like the NUM. Workers began to join the AMCU, resulting in the Greater Lonmin Workers Committee being set up as a go-between for the workers and the union, a form of mediation between the two. The committee constantly reminded the AMCU leadership to stay true to the workers. With the AMCU growing in strength and building trust, the parts were in place for the power of collective action to once again be expressed.

Chapter 6 looks at the great strike of 2014, which took place at a time when workers at Amplats, Implats and Lonmin were united in the AMCU. The leader of the AMCU felt pressure from all sides, but ultimately drove the strategy based on the workers' mandate saying, 'AMCU – it belongs to the workers' (p.146). The workers of the platinum belt went on strike for 15 weeks, until late April 2014, and the book tells of the tensions and difficulties during this time. However, the workers knew that their union affiliation meant they were legally protected. Alfons Mofokeng, one of the initial

worker leaders, is quoted as saying: 'You know what motivated these people? Was one thing, that is Mr Mathunjwa's (AMCU leader) certificate, it does not expire. It does not get expired' (p.154). The book explains how unity grew as the strike continued, with outside groups offering different types of support. Although there were issues within the AMCU, the book talks of the ultimate, definitive source of continued unity being the fact that no decisions were ever taken without consulting all of the workers. This demand of control by the workers and the independence shown by the worker committees to shape their own lives, resulting in the unions having to do their bidding, spread to other situations. This is what the book names 'The spirit of Marikana' – the insurgency among the rank and file that forced the trade union to act in its members' interest rather than fold to the mining companies.

This book is important to anyone who is interested in understanding not only the events surrounding the massacre at Marikana and the great strike of 2014 but also the social movements in South Africa more broadly. Everything has a context, a *long fetch*, and this book shows this. It is important because it offers people in struggle a guide to the thinking, the challenges, the tactics and the victories of those who came before them. It is important because it shows that ordinary workers can indeed be 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense, as it tells of how 'ordinary workers developed a critique of the hegemonic discourse of their employers (and pocket trade unions), formed a counter-discourse based on their own lived experiences and then undertook a series of actions in order to transform their reality, and – unintentionally, at least at first – the political face of South Africa' (p.18).



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## Note

- 1 George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the dark: the hidden histories of popular music*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.