

South Africa After Marikana

Suzi Weissman interviews Leonard Gentle

Monday 5 November 2012, by [GENTLE Leonard](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2012).

This interview was conducted by Suzi Weissman for her radio program “Beneath the Surface” on KPFK, in Los Angeles on September 29, 2012. It was transcribed by Martin J. Kessler and slightly abridged for publication here.

Suzi Weissman: Welcome to Beneath the Surface. I’m very pleased to have Leonard Gentle with us today. We see a situation of a generalized strike wave that is front page news in the financial press, the Financial Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the business pages of other newspapers; it’s quite extraordinary.

Leonard Gentle has been a political activist since the 1970s and a trade union organizer in the 1990s. He is director of the International Labor Research and Information Group, which is an NGO doing popular education with trade unions and social movements throughout southern Africa. His article, “The Massacre of Our Illusions...and the Seeds of Something New,” about the Marikana miners’ massacre, was widely circulated [[1](#)] Leonard, what illusions were they and how they were massacred?

Leonard Gentle: For those of us, the majority of the people in the country, who went through and were participants in the whole phase of struggling to win democracy in South Africa, the biggest organization that people looked to and were part of in winning that struggle was the African National Congress. So, around the ANC was a kind of moral authority; it represented for many people, for most people, the best of our sense of democracy, of a new kind of society that would get rid of the violence and the oppression and the inequality and the racism of apartheid.

That was achieved in 1994, and 18 years later we’ve begun to see the slow erosion of that optimism as the ANC government began to adopt all the neoliberal policies that so many other governments in the world have adopted, and turn against all the sense of reducing inequality, of promoting people’s wealth and health and better quality of living standards.

This was a slow process of erosion and disillusionment, but Marikana represented a shattering of any residual feeling that this kind of moral authority continued to exist.

And because it’s a democratically-elected government, a government that emerged from a liberation movement, unleashing police against striking mine workers, it takes us all back to the old apartheid days of violence by a repressive government against the people. And that’s why it’s called “The Massacre of our Illusions.”

SW: Because this time it came from your own government?

LG: This is our own government.

SW: The strike wave that began at the Marikana Platinum Mine, owned by Lonmin, ended

with a massacre of what, at least 34 people? What happened there? How can it be that the South African government which is no longer an apartheid regime was treating workers as if it still was apartheid.

LG: Thirty-four people were killed by the police. Marikana is a small settlement, a kind of shanty town close to the mine, owned by Lonmin. Lonmin is an old company that used to be called Lonrho. It's had a new ownership for a number of years, and it's in a part of the country called the North West, which is home to some of the richest platinum mines in the world. In fact, South Africa's got about 80% of all the platinum reserves in the world. Some of the wealthiest mines in the world are in that area, but they are also home to some of the worst shanty towns.

What happened is that workers at the mine came out on strike. These particular workers are the underground workers, or the rock-drill workers. South Africa's also got the deepest mines in the world. Some of the platinum mines are not that deep but the gold mines are somewhere up to four kilometers deep. We're talking a depth that is hard to imagine human beings going down to those depths and drilling into rock to unearth gold and platinum that make so much of other people's wealth possible.

In South Africa since 1994, people have the right to strike but they have to follow "due process." If they don't it's called an unprotected strike. It's a wildcat strike, in other words.

SW: So this is not about whether or it's sanctioned by the unions, it's just something that's outside the protection of labor law?

LG: Yes. In terms of labor law it's a complicated process — you have to give 50 days' notice, you have to have a certificate issued by a mediation authority — it's a long bureaucratic process.

SW: We're seeing in the headlines things like "No Excuse for Illegal Strikes," and so maybe that process wasn't immediately clear to people outside South Africa.

LG: Even if it were a union that sanctioned the strike, it would still be unprotected if it didn't follow the processes that the union has to negotiate with an employer. If the negotiations break down there's a mediation authority called the CCMA which issues a certificate, and then the union has 50 days of balloting and checking its members, whether they agree to go on strike, and then it's got 48 hours in which it has to serve notice on the employer that it's going to strike. Then it's called a protected strike.

Actually, the media got it all wrong when they referred to an "illegal strike," because strikes are not illegal. They're not criminal activities. Even our own media misappropriated the word "illegal" to suggest that strikers were doing something that's criminal.

We fought many years in the struggle for democracy to decriminalize strikes, meaning they're unprotected if you don't follow due process, so your employer can dismiss you, but you can't have the police put you in jail for going on strike if it's a wildcat strike.

I just wanted to clear that up. But in this instance, the mine workers came out on an unprotected strike because the major union in the industry, the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM), has the recognition agreement with the employers in the mining sector as a whole. It is under the rubric of the Chamber of Mines, as well as being in the platinum sector.

They had a two-year period in which a labor agreement existed. The workers felt that the union was no longer representing them, that the agreement meant that, in particular, the rock-drill workers were not getting any increases during that period. Lonmin, in the interim, had offered bonuses to

the more skilled workers, the technicians who don't go underground.

This was perceived as discriminating against the underground rock-drill workers. They were peeved at the union signing a two-year agreement that they weren't part of. They didn't qualify for these bonuses, and so they came out on strike. It was an unprotected strike, because it wasn't authorized by the union and didn't follow due process.

In the early days of the strike, a policeman and a shop steward of NUM were killed. On the 16th of August, a police battalion came toward the workers who were congregating on a hill just outside the mine. The police shot at random amongst the striking workers and chased them. There is now evidence emerging of systematic killings — workers who had hidden behind rocks were cornered and shot.

The journalists who interviewed eyewitnesses indicate a level of revenge on the part of the police, ostensibly because one of the police had been killed earlier.

Jacob Zuma, the president of the country, appointed a commission of inquiry to try and find out who is responsible and how the massacre happened. There's much public anger because nobody's taking responsibility for the 34 people killed.

No minister of police, no commissioner of police has been sanctioned in any way. The commission is only due to report sometime in January. And emotions are boiling over. An industrial dispute was turned into an act of savaging, with people being mowed down.

SW: And it got such international attention, too.

LG: It got huge international attention. Its significance, and it's important to capture this, is that this is post-liberation. South African black people have a long history of state violence perpetrated against them. People have had a familiarity of over the hundred-plus years of being killed, either in any kind of dispute or in the implementation of apartheid. But this is in the period where we have a democracy and an elected government....

SW: But even though there was the massacre, strikers did secure a 22% wage increase. This has emboldened many more to go into struggle against their employers. How is the labor upsurge spreading? What does it to the tenuous relationship between the trade union federation COSATU and the miners' union and the workers' movement in general? If COSATU wants to survive with any legitimacy it clearly needs to embrace these workers, and yet it's also got a relationship with the government.

LG: I mentioned earlier the sense of the liberation movement now, as the governing party in a sense being responsible politically for the police killing striking mine workers. But the liberation period was also a period of an alliance between the African National Congress and the major trade union federation COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

Since 1994 when we achieved democracy, the ruling party was gradually being seen in the popular domain, and certainly amongst ordinary poor and working-class people, as having shifted away from its liberation ethos and embracing very conservative, neoliberal economic policies.

But the trade union federation, COSATU, still had a kind of moral authority because it positioned itself in the public domain to the left of the ANC, as a sort of critic of the ANC's betrayals of its liberation promises.

At the same time, however, even though COSATU often came out publicly criticizing policies of

privatization and deregulation, COSATU is also in a political alliance with the ruling party. It's called the tripartite alliance [ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party — ed.] Over the years COSATU has had this almost Janus-faced relationship — on the one hand, it would quite be robust in its public criticism, but on the other, at election times it would call on its membership to support the ruling party.

This Marikana event is now an enormous challenge to COSATU. The National Union of Mine Workers is its biggest affiliate. COSATU probably has something like 2.2 million members and close to a half a million of those are members of the National Union of Mine Workers.

The fact that workers were rebelling not only against their employers but also rejecting their union as not representing them means there is a crack in confidence over COSATU representing its membership and the broader working class in South Africa.

SW: Can talk briefly about the strike wave that's developed? What you think is going to happen next?

LG: I think the genie's not going to be put back into the bottle very easily. The killings, and also the victory won by the Lonmin workers in getting a 22% raise, have now inspired many other workers in the mining sector, and also workers beyond that sector. We also have a truck drivers' strike at the moment.

All of these strike actions are actually using the terms of demands of the Lonmin workers, calling for a 22% wage increase that employers consider "impossible."

This strike wave is beginning to affect the whole country. Because it's largely occurring outside the formal industrial relations sphere, on the one hand it's inspiring, it's unleashing this enormous energy. Many of us feel that this could be the basis of a new pro-democracy movement in the country. But on the other hand I think it has to face the challenge of further state repression.

Public opinion is being galvanized against the workers as being irresponsible and chasing away investors. All of this is an enormous challenge to COSATU, because either COSATU embraces this new wave of workers as something positive, or it may well become irrelevant. We may see a new labor movement emerging, one that takes us beyond where COSATU has managed to bring us up to this point.

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC), n° 161, November/December 2012:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3722>

Footnotes

[1] at <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/686.php> among other sites — ed. Available on ESSF (article 26836), [South Africa: The Massacre of Our Illusions ... And the Seeds of Something New](#).