

Reaction to the Farlam Report on the Marikana Massacre

By Zwelinzima Vavi

President Zuma has finally released the Farlam Commission's report on the worst atrocity in post-apartheid South Africa - that fateful day in August 2012 when 34 workers were cruelly shot and killed by police in Marikana bringing the number of deaths to 45, as 11 workers were also killed in violence amongst workers themselves.

A more detailed analysis of the long 600-page report will be necessary, but my first reaction is that it is a bit wishy-washy and that there are still many unanswered questions, some of which the Commission ducked by recommending further investigations by other bodies.

COSATU was one of the first to call for and welcome the Independent Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the atrocity. A special declaration by its 11th National Congress, a month later, voiced extreme concern at the violent reaction of the police, not only in Marikana but in other labour disputes, which reinforce the perception that rather than protecting ordinary people, police are advancing the interests of employers.

This is borne out by the Farlam report, which criticizes the role of the police and the lies by some of their witnesses to try and whitewash their role. He invites the President to investigate the possibility of disciplinary action against National Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega and North West police commissioner Lt-Gen Zukiswa Mbombo which I strongly support.

But the President should answer the obvious question of why he ever appointed a police chief who lacked the skills, training and experience for such a position. It is symptomatic of the practice of 'cadre deployment', which values personal loyalty over qualifications for the job, and he should accept his share of the blame.

If Phiyega's hands are dripping with the workers' blood so are those of the President who employed her very well aware that she had neither experience nor skills to head police operations. I have no qualms with cadre deployment but we must insist that this must not be done without requisite skills and experience.

There is a very worrying comment by Farlam that there was an amendment to the terms of reference, which he was alerted to via a letter from the president as late as April, to the effect that the commission is not allowed to make findings on the Executive.

This means the report was designed to find scapegoats; hence its negative findings against the foot soldiers and not the political leadership. It comes as no surprise that the report makes no findings against any member of the Executive. Poor Phiyega, Mbombo and workers are made the scapegoats for

the massacre.

The Report also attaches blame to the leaders of the trade unions, NUM and AMCU. I strongly believe that the Marikana massacre would not have happened if the workers in the Platinum sector had not been riven with conflicts and division.

COSATU had already identified the problem of union leaders not listening to the workers, the widening of social distance between leadership and membership and even outright corruption.

Attempts before the crisis on 16th to bring the warring parties together were thwarted by the strength of differences among the workers, which led to violence, intimidation and even murder by worker against worker.

I really hope that the new leadership of the NUM will be able to reunite the workers and switch attention back to the real problems facing mineworkers.

“The events of 16th August,” as the 11th Congress Declaration said, “and the ongoing violence, whose main victims remain the exploited masses, has shifted the focus and blame from the Platinum bosses who have systematically undermined collective bargaining and promoted division amongst workers, and who have been sitting in the shadows enjoying profits from the very workers whose families have now been robbed of their only breadwinners.”

That is why Congress also called for a second Independent Commission of Inquiry to work parallel to the Farlam’s “to investigate the employment and social conditions of workers in the mining industry, historically and at present”.

Such a second inquiry is still vital, so that we can better understand the underlying reasons why such outrages as Marikana can still happen and to find ways to ensure that they never happen again.

The mining industry has for more than a century been the heart of South African capitalism, built and sustained through the exploitation of black labour, founded by ruthless colonial adventurers like Cecil Rhodes and Barney Barnato and later developed by giant multinational companies.

In alliance with the financial sector, the mine owners have for years dominated the economy. It was the main pillar of apartheid and still entrenches the wealth and power of a tiny white elite and their foreign backers.

The industry directly employs around half a million workers, with thousands more employed indirectly by suppliers of goods and services. Its contribution to our gross domestic product is around 18%. It also accounts for over half South Africa’s foreign exchange earnings.

It is also an industry which suffers ongoing fatalities, occupational diseases, unchecked environmental degradation, and squalid living conditions for many mine workers.

Between 1900 and 1994, 69,000 mine workers died as result accidents and over a million were seriously injured. While the rate of fatalities and injuries has declined, it is still totally unacceptable. 2301 workers died between 2001 and 2011, and nearly 43,000 were seriously injured.

As the NUM has put it “Many mining workers employed underground will not live to see retirement without bodily harm. They will either be killed, injured or fall sickly.”

While progress has been made in recruiting and training women in the industry, the environment remains hostile, with discrimination, violence and rape.

Squalid housing and environmental damage remain as problems. Housing allowances to persuade workers to move out of the squalid hostels have only led to them moving to equally squalid squatter camps. Instead of a people-centred, sustainable modern city, Rustenburg, the fastest growing city in Africa, is characterised by mushrooming informal settlements and poor service delivery. Corruption is rife, and, as the Marikana story shows, black workers’ life is cheap.

All these problems were supposed to be resolved by the signing of a Framework Agreement for a Sustainable Mining Industry, signed by organised labour, employers and government in 2013, which acknowledged that “there are serious problems within our mining industry, both long-term and short-term”.

It recognised the industry’s problems are historical and structural – exploitation of workers, the migrant labour system, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions, squalid single-sex hostels, environmental pollution and an immediate crisis of violence and anarchy in and around the mines which ha cost far too many lives.

The Agreement recognized that “workers have to see rapid changes in their working and living conditions and visibly improved career prospects. We need to take urgent steps to build integrated communities with adequate social amenities, including labour sending areas”.

Stakeholders committed themselves “to act swiftly to make this agreement work. Without abrogating the responsibilities of parties to this agreement,

where challenges arise parties they will all, where necessary, meet to deal with them immediately”.

Signing an agreement was the easy part however. Implementing it is the biggest challenge and this is yet to happen, with the employers the main culprits. Solutions must be pursued, as part of the overall drive to build a completely new society, in which mineworkers receive their rightful share of the wealth that they created by their labour.

That is why I fully support their current struggle for a living wage which reflects the skills and danger that work in the mines involves.