On 27 August 2012, directly below the mountain in Marikana where 34 workers were brutally murdered by the police less than two weeks earlier, a Lonmin worker named Babalo, who was responsible for welcoming visitors after the massacre, introduced us to an extremely influential and arguably new form of independent working-class leadership. We sat with eight workers in the sun on the dry yellow hay-like grass and asked them, ‘what do you call yourselves?’ One of the leaders, Thabiso, began to chair the meeting. He smirked at us and then responded that their organisation had no name, but that they were the ‘workers’ committee’, as if to suggest that this was self-explanatory. Neither the management of Lonmin, nor the established unions including the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) nor the competing Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) were in control. Rather, it was the workers themselves – their vehicle was the workers’ committee. This was our first interaction with the committee at Marikana and we have maintained contact with them since.

This has been essential for obtaining the sensitive information which surrounds the massacre given the levels of distrust that have subsequently developed amongst the workers. As one former worker committee member who was

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1 Lonmin is the third largest platinum mine in the world. Marikana is the small town in which parts of Lonmin co-exist. They are located in the Rustenburg platinum belt in the Northwest Province of South Africa – and approximately 100 kilometres from Johannesburg. The names of workers that I have interviewed or received information from have been given pseudonyms. At this time I was working with Thapelo Lekgowa, who was amongst the first to identify the workers’ committee at Marikana following the massacre. He is an intrepid researcher who remains committed to the people of Marikana.

2 The NUM was the largest affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and included about 300,000 members until the Marikana massacre took place. In the platinum belt, workers left the NUM in vast numbers – believing it had betrayed them – and joined AMCU. COSATU is part of the tri-partite alliance which also includes the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).
responsible for negotiating with the management after 16 August indicated to us in the process of arranging an interview with him, ‘during these times, one cannot even trust his own brother’. Some of the workers would later turn to alcoholism to cope while others would take their own lives and the lives of others. The events of 16 August have scarred the consciousness of the workers in Lonmin. One worker, who helped initiate the August 2012 strike, lamented that:

It was very difficult for us and even now our lives after 16 August have changed and I don’t remember the last time we felt happy about anything or smiling about something since 16 [August 2012] ... Even at night, when you sleep, once you think about what happened then you lose your sleep for two or three hours because you took everything upon yourself. And then you will keep thinking, why did things get like that?

To a certain extent we – as researchers – have also lived Marikana and we have dreamt of it at night, but our experiences are nothing like those of the heroic figures who risked their lives on the infamous mountain. To them, the strike literally became a matter of life and death. Many of the workers we have engaged with continue to vow that they would die, if not for their demand for a living wage – R12,500 – then for the rights of workers more generally. We have experienced Marikana a great step removed from these realities.

Seeking to uncover the intimate dynamics within a post-massacre context is obviously no easy task and requires a significant degree of commitment on behalf of the researchers. Workers understandably tended to be sceptical – and at times even hostile – to those who came to Marikana, including journalists and academics. In order to understand Marikana, and its workers’ committee, it was therefore necessary to conduct ethnographic research. This seeks to understand, from the people’s own perspective, what they do and the meanings that they associate with their actions. It also involves participant observation,

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3 In fact, this statement was told to Siphiwe Mbatha – a high spirited revolutionary who is the coordinator of a community-based organisation of the Thembelhle Crisis Committee. Siphiwe has assisted me in making contacts, interviewing and translating for me during interviews with workers in Lonmin, Impala and Anglo.


5 The workers on the mountain were demanding a living wage of R12,500 after deductions, which is approximately equivalent to US$1,250 per month – and about 2.5 times what they were earning at that time. The demand for R12,500 has since become a rallying call for much of the working class in South Africa more generally.