

Evaluation of labor agency strategy: The case of a strike at a South African open cast mine in 2012

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Introduction

Labor-related strikes in South Africa have a long history stretching back to the country's colonial and apartheid periods; and they have frequently been very violent, resulting in deaths and massive destruction of property. Noticeably, workers have won some of these struggles and lost others. This, therefore, shows that workers have agency regardless of the outcome. The continuity of strike action on various scales of intensity and violence in the democratic era highlights a labor tradition that can be traced back to the embryonic stages of revolutionary struggles to challenge oppression and racial divide in South Africa's history. The wild cat strikes¹ of 2012 left the country in a state of shock not only due to the massive corporate losses caused by production stoppages, but also because many lives were lost (Harvey, 2012; Reuters, 2012). Having started at the platinum rich Rustenburg and Marikana belt, wildcat strike actions soon spread to other platinum, gold and iron ore mines (Reuters, 2012). The wildcat strikes left a bitter legacy that will continue to haunt the country (Alexander, Lekgowa, Mmope, Sinwell and Xezwi, 2013; Harvey, 2012).

To be specific, the 'unprotected' strike at the Huntington open-pit iron ore mine is of specific interest because of its nature and how it was executed by close to 300 mine workers' from two shifts out of a total workforce of over 8 000. It was a spectacular strike action in which few workers from two shifts initiated unprotected strike action. However, the strike action was not successful because their demands were not met, the majority of the strikers lost their jobs, bank financed motor-vehicles and houses among other benefits. Given this, I show how mine workers at the

Huntington mine² drew upon different power resources and made use of various forms of agency in articulating their demands using space. The Huntington incident and its associated violence demonstrates the inability of workers to combine and exercise power in certain ways on space during the unprotected strike³ action in 2012. Thus, the analysis of this strike action seeks to contribute towards enhanced theorization of labor agency through power and how it operates on space and offer a unique case where striking workers seemed to have an upper hand but failed to have their demands met. In what follows, the article first provides the context of the wildcat strike followed by the causes of the strike action. The next section discusses South Africa's labor studies on mining and the industrial relations system. After that, the article presents and appraises labor geography together with power resources approach, worker agency and space as analytic lenses to understand the strike action. This is followed by a summary on methods used to gather data. Finally, the article draws together the various loose ends scattered in the study and makes an overall conclusion.

Context of the strike

The strike action at Huntington was triggered by an interplay of dynamics at the mine, the organized labor, Marikana strike wave and national politics. To start with, Huntington mine is one of the biggest open-pit iron ore mines in the world and it started operations in early 1950s. It has two sister mines involved in the extraction of iron ore. Despite being old, it is a highly mechanized. In 2012, a new leadership had been elected to lead the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) branch at Huntington. The new leadership however, proved to be inexperienced as most of them were in leadership positions for the first time. They lacked negotiating experience and basic labour relations procedures in the workplace. NUM leadership was divided along factions in the African National Congress (ANC) whose political dynamics played out at the national level (Buhlungu et

al, 2013). The ANC was to hold its leadership elective congress, and thus, NUM got entangled through its affiliation with the Congress of South African Trade Unions - an alliance partner with South African Communist Party and the ANC. Between 2 April and 10 August, the branch leadership had written two memorandums with the following grievances to Huntington mine management; shortage of housing and transport, the role of the absenteeism office, unfair medical panels for appointment purposes and derecognition of union leadership by management (Buhlungu et al, 2013). The second memorandum had additional grievances on disagreement on the amount of tax on employee share scheme pay-outs and discrepancies on payslips on those offered by Huntington mine and the head office in Pretoria. The NUM branch leadership and its constituency were not satisfied with the General Manager's (GM) responses to their grievances and therefore, lodged a dispute.

The stand out grievance is the employee share scheme pay-outs. It had been established in 2006 and became problematic in 2011 when the South African Revenue Authority introduced taxes on dividend pay-outs. The new taxes accounted for instance R200 000 from a R500 000 dividend pay-out; and this did not sit well with qualifying workers (Buhlungu et al, 2013; Mashayamombe, 2014). This led to distrust and rumours that Huntington was working with SARS and had stolen workers' money. Thus, the new trade union leadership vowed to visit SARS offices and help workers recover their stolen money. Consequently, Huntington mine invited SARS officials to provide explanations on the new tax system on dividend pay-out and how it was calculated to the workers. Organized labor and its constituency were not convinced. In addition, an internal dispute resolution (11 September 2012) organized by Huntington mine's Industrial Relations division which was attended by organized labor and management to discuss contents and response of the memorandum did not yield desired outcomes for the unions. The union's branch leadership lodged

a dispute with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) to conciliate on the 16th of October 2012 without having exhausted internal dispute resolution processes (Buhlungu et al, 2013).

Furthermore, an employee claimed to have been offered a seemingly different payslip at the head office in comparison to the one he gets at Huntington. These discrepancies were clarified by the mine as concluded in the report and this led to further agitation that the mine was deliberately undermining the new union leadership because it was still inexperienced (Buhlungu et al, 2013). The failure by the union to get back the workers' stolen money and get concessions in earlier memorandum of demands led to breakdown in trust between the NUM branch leadership and workers and the management. Unresolved misunderstandings, discontent and poor communication created a space for political opportunism (Buhlungu, et al, 2013). As a precaution in light of events at Marikana and to find solutions at Huntington between the mine and labor, the mine organized a workshop on lessons that can be learnt from the Marikana tragedy from 26 to 27 September. On the eve of their departure to the conference venue, an individual employee from the mining section delivered a memorandum to the GM demanding an increase on every employee's basic salary of R 15 000-00 across board. The memorandum demanded a response by 3 October 2012. Upon strong advice by trade unions at the workshop not to negotiate with workers outside normal collective bargaining procedures, the GM advised workers to raise their grievances through agreed channels.

Another memorandum with similar wording was sent again on the 30th of September 2012 and the GM responded encouraging the workers to follow recognized channels. The GM sensing that unprotected strike action was imminent, sent out a flyer on the 1st of October warning workers that industrial action would be un-procedural given the visibility of a go-slow. On the 2nd of October,

the GM wrote another brief informing workers that industrial action without following proper procedure would be un-procedural. Mine management distributed flyers across the workplace and mining section workers took offense and labelled the mine's behaviour as arrogant, aggressive and yet owed them money (Buhlungu et al, 2013; Mashayamombe, 2014). The night shift mining section workers discussed the contents of the flyers and started work until 3am of the 3rd of October when they assembled all the trucks and equipment on a single parking area and blocked entrance into the mining area at the dumps. Consequently, Huntington management closed down the entire mine for safety reasons as they negotiated with the striking workers at the mountain top.

Causes of the wildcat strike action

The strike action at Huntington mine was caused by internal and external factors. At Huntington mine, informalization of industrial relations procedures evidenced by juniorization and marginalization of industrial relations function, the non-application of formal industrial relations procedures, trade union weakness and employee perspectives on remuneration played a part in causing the wildcat strike action (Buhlungu et al, 2013; Mashayamombe, 2014). This can be evidenced by the GM's open-door policy that saw memorandums being sent directly by-passing agreed upon procedures. Furthermore, workplace legacy of a racialized labor market fuelled allegations of discrimination of black Africans in terms of recruitment, promotions and remuneration. In addition, trade union weaknesses particularly NUM due to ANC's national politics created a vacuum exploited by workers. Unintended consequences of employee share scheme payouts in terms of change of lifestyles and failure to sustain them, queries on amount taxed by SARS, accommodation and transport problems constituted internal factors that led to the motivation to undertake the wildcat strike.

Externally, the ANC was to have its elective conference at Mangaung later in the year and played a part given the fact that NUM is an affiliate of COSATU an alliance partner with the ANC. The influence of strike wave at Marikana that had started at Anglo American Platinum earlier in the year culminating in the death of 44 people also played an indirect role (Alexander et al, 2013; Chinguno, 2015; Stewart, 2013). This is evidenced by the repertoire of gathering at the mountain top, demanding R15 000 00 as entry level salary which was slightly higher to the R12 500 00 that workers had demanded at the platinum belt (Sinwell, 2013). What is evident is that the wildcat strike did not happen in a vacuum, but rather, it was influenced by a combination of factors. It is not the focus of this paper to engage survey data, but rather to evaluate workers actions before, during and after the wildcat strike at Huntington mine using power, space and agency. This section has provided context and conditions that led to the strike action. Are there any parallels that can be drawn between labor process of surface iron ore mining and deep-level underground platinum mining in South Africa given the fact that the strike action happened just after ?

South Africa's iron ore open cast and platinum's deep-level mining landscape

South Africa's broader industrial relations system through the Constitution of the republic and Labour Relations Act of 1995 makes the provision for the right to strike by workers through agreed upon rules and procedures. The current industrial relations system and related institutions came through protracted struggles during the colonial and apartheid periods (Allen, 2005; Bendix, 2015; Gumede, 2015; Johnstone, 1969). Worker and employee rights are now entrenched through the South African Constitution, LRA, Basic Conditions of Employment Act and other numerous related pieces of legislation. It has also given opportunity for organized labor to actively organize and represent workers and negotiate wages in the workplace (Bendix, 2015; Chinguno, 2015). The right to strike is an important weapon and source of power for labor in the democratic South Africa

(LRA, 1995; Maree, 1985; Webster, 2017). Large-scale strikes have shaped political, economic and social change, and often turned violent in South Africa (Moodie, 2005; Webster, 2017).

Furthermore, through trade unions, workers have been able to draw from various power resources that include; structural, associational, institutional, societal and market-place bargaining power to realise their demands and interests (Brookes, 2013; Silver, 2003; Webster, 2017; Wright, 2000). Over the last 15 years, there has been a spike in unprotected strikes by workers (work stoppages that do not follow set rules and procedures) especially in the mining sector (Buhlungu, 2009; Chinguno, 2013; 2015; Stewart, 2016). These strikes have been led by dissatisfied workers accusing trade unions of failing them and often characterized by violence (Buhlungu et al, 2013; Chinguno, 2015; Gumede, 2015; Von Holdt, 2010). This has led scholars point towards loss of touch of trade unions with its rank and file and rejection of the broader industrial relations framework and its related institutions, rules and norms (Buhlungu, 2009; Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout, 2008; Chinguno, 2013, 2015; Moodie, 2015; Sinwell, 2015). This requires a sharp focus on the shifts taking place within the South African labor and mining landscape.

The mining industry remains a key contributor on South Africa's economy (Wilson, 2001). Gold, Platinum Group Metals, Iron ore, Copper, Chrome, Manganese, Diamonds, Coal and Sand are some of the major commodities within the mining industry. The excavation of minerals in South African mines is mainly through underground and surface mineral excavation. The ore body of minerals including increasing depth, reef width, reef grade and ore type influence the choice of mining methods (Stewart, 2015). Most of the factors mentioned above mainly speak to gold and platinum extraction in South Africa. Mining has gone ultra-deep due to ore bodies for Gold, PGMs, Diamonds, Chrome and Coal (Phakathi, 2013; Stewart, 2015). Of interest in this discussion is

deep-underground Platinum mining to provide a brief background to Platinum mines strike wave in comparison to open-cast Iron Ore mining at which Huntington mine wildcat strike took place.

Underground mineral extraction in South Africa is dominated by conventional mining methods, which is labor intensive and deploys hand-held mechanical rock drill technologies operated by human Rock Drill Operators at the rock face (Stewart, 2015). Migrant labor constitutes the greater portion of labor workforce at underground platinum mines dotted along the Bushveld Igneous Complex's eastern and western limbs (Stewart, 2013; Stewart, 2015). The labor process of a majority of South African Platinum mines just like gold are less mechanized, hence constituted by a huge workforce often characterized by low wages excluding RDOs (Mashayamombe, 2018; Moodie, 1994; Stewart, 2013, 2015). In contrast, the labor process of Iron Ore extraction at South African open cast is mechanized and semi-automated to automated given the homogenous and shallow distribution of iron ore deposits (Mashayamombe, 2018). Most Iron Ore mining operations are located in the Northern Cape province in South Africa. Open-cast mining involves drilling, blasting, loading, hauling and dumping. All the operations are mechanized and operated by trained operators with grade 12 National Senior Certificate in the case of Huntington mine (Mashayamombe, 2018). In other words, Huntington mine and its sister operations recruitment process requires NSC at entry level as compared to Platinum and other commodity mines like gold that are less mechanized and require physique and not NSC at the entry level (Mashayamombe, 2018). In fact, NSC certificate with a pass is a requirement for entry level jobs at some new iron ore and coal mines in South Africa (Mashayamombe, 2018). Remuneration levels tend to be higher within the collective bargaining units at iron ore mines in comparison to deep-level platinum and gold mines in South Africa (MCSA, 2016). Major open-cast mines

remuneration levels tend to be high due to mechanisation and intensive use of technology and educational levels and thought they were safe from 2012 platinum wildcat strikes.

Underground deep-level mines are characterized by discomfort, deafening noise increasing heat, unstable ground, seismic events, machinery, water logging, dust and ventilation challenges, cramped space and to look out for potential hazard (Benya, 2016 see also Moodie, 1994; Stewart, 2015). On the other hand, on surface mining, machinery and equipment, dust, high weather temperatures, rain, thunder and lightning, slippery roads, slope failure and aquifer bursts create challenges to health and safety and production. These various factors create different dynamics to labor process on underground and surface mining, and hence different reactions by mineworkers including mining occupational culture and working conditions (Benya, 2016). Mineworkers, both on surface and underground mining that occupy the low hierarchy bear the brunt including RDO and other Operators. RDOs at platinum mines were at the heart of triggering and leading wildcat strikes in 2012 (Chinguno, 2013, 2015; Stewart, 2013) and a comparison with Operators from Huntington Iron Ore mine is important in order to establish parallels or differences if any. The above sought to establish similarities and differences at surface iron ore mining and underground platinum mining and the role of different sets of Operators in the mining labor process.

Workers, capital and geography

Labor geography is a sub-discipline of economic geography that re-centers worker or labor agency in the examination of economic geographies of capitalism (Herod, 1997). Labor geography scholars are interested on issues that concern workers and include: (i) worker agency i.e. collective, individual, what counts as agency and how it can be evaluated (ii) conflicts over spatial scale at which certain activities take place, local, regional, national or transnational between labor and capital and (iii) the role of the state in regulating labor and the impact of this on how the

construction and functioning of a landscape intersects with legislation, policy and ideology (Bergene, Endresen and Knutsen, 2010; Castree, 2007; Coe and Jodhuis-Lier, 2011; Lier, 2007). Below is an outline of some of the concepts used in Labor Geography debates that I engage with on the analysis of the strike action.

Agency, power and space

The core of labor geography is the assertion that workers are not passive recipients to actions of capital, but active geographic agents that are spatially embedded and this opens possibilities for social action (Herod, 2010; Coe and Jodhuis-Lier, 2011). Workers have agency to move across space or shape space through differentiated class struggles in the quest to realize their own spatial vision that may conflict with that of capital (Herod, 2012). What is agency then? Coe and Jodhuis-Lier (2011:2), drawing from Herod (2001), see worker agency as "... the ability of workers to create their own economic geographies through pursuing their own spatial fixes and scalar strategies." Workers seek to shape space to "...secure their own social and biological reproduction on a daily and generational basis...jobs, homes, shops, schools, recreation facilities" (Herod, 2010:19). It has also been shown that agency can be collective or individual (Coe and Jodhuis-Lier, 2011 see also Kiil and Knutsen, 2016; Bergene, Endresen and Knutsen, 2010; Hastings and Mackinnon, 2017). Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2010:257) summarize agency as being "... informal or formal, individual or collective, spontaneous or goal directed, sporadic or sustained, and can operate at different scales." In light of the above, the meaning of agency has to be broad in order to reflect different worker formations and affiliations. Therefore, worker agency is action that is calculated or not calculated, formal or informal, organized or unorganized, collective or individual, spontaneous or goal-directed on landscapes at various scale as part of social actors' praxis drawing power from different sources.

Linking agency with the theory of power assists to systematically evaluate success or failure of labor agency and its objectives. I draw from Power Resources Approach which holds that workers can execute their class struggles through effective collective mobilization of power resources when they contest capital (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018:115). Drawing from various labor experiences (see Schmalz et al, 2018), PRA is constituted of different power resources that include; structural power, associational power, institutional power and societal power (Brookes, 2013; Silver, 2003; Schmalz et al, 2018; Wright, 2000;). These sources of power enable workers to have capacity to do something, but at the same time, this power is relational because employers can also deploy it to exert their interests (Levesque and Murray, 2010). This is because both labor and capital are embedded in power relations and social relationships and hence tap from these sources depending on context and resource (Schmalz et al, 2018). Therefore, it is important for workers and capital to understand that power is not permanent, it constantly shifts and has to be strategically deployed.

Associational power refers to “...various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organisations of workers ...” and these would include trade unions, works councils, community organisations (Wright, 2000; 962; Schmalz, 2018). It requires actors who are able to mobilize and execute strategies, tactics and follow organizational processes (Schmalz, 2018). Another power resource is structural power that is derived from workers position as wage earners within an economic system or labor markets hence the ability to disrupt production (Silver, 2003; Schmalz et al, 2018; Wright, 2000). Under structural power, Silver (2003) further identifies market-place bargaining power (one’s position in the labor market in terms of skills level) and workplace bargaining power (strategic location within the production process) (Brookes, 2013; Schmalz et al, 2018). The location of workers in the production process is a locus of power as it

enables them to strike, do sit-ins, refuse to work or sabotage a company as part of the bargaining process. Furthermore, workers can exert logistical power by blockading roads, access into workstations and the workplace itself as part of their political praxis (Lambert, Webster and Bezuidenhout, 2012; Webster, 2015). Social actors manipulate geography to exert pressure and exploit capital's points of vulnerability (Webster, 2015).

Institutional power is a secondary form of power, which is an outcome of structural power and associational power struggles and negotiations (Schmalz et al, 2018: 121; Brinkmann and Natchwey, 2010: 21). It is an attempt to reconcile differences between labor and capital through agreed upon legal and social frameworks and mechanisms. In South Africa, this includes bargaining councils, CCMA, National Economic Development and Labor Council, the Constitution of the Republic and LRA 1995. The idea is to enable competing parties to find each other, make concessions, co-operate, contest each through agreed rules and procedures. Thus, trade unions have to be careful not to sell out their constituency into the hands of capital. The dual nature of institutional power requires trade unions to represent grassroots interests, negotiate and mediate with employers and the state without being co-opted (Schmalz et al, 2018). Thus, institutional power is a source of power for both labor and capital to find each other and resolve conflict. It can also result in the weakening of labor's interests.

Coalition and solidarity between organized labor and the society is important. Societal power is "the latitudes for action that arises from viable cooperation contexts with other social actors and broader society's engagement and solidarity with workers' demands" (Schmalz et al, 2018:122). Trade unions have to horizontally intensify their struggles the same way they vertically up-scale pressure on capital out of the workplace into the society creating a new battlefield (Levesque and Murray, 2013). These are the power resources that are linked to societal power; coalitional power

and discursive/moral power (Brookes, 2013; Chun, 2009; Fine, 2006; Schmalz et al, 2018). Coalitional power boosts associational power by tapping into existing societal resources, location and mobilization with assistance of churches, the unemployed, social movements, students, churches and the civil society (Brookes, 2013; Schmalz et al, 2018). Discursive or moral power enables workers to tap into society's moral narratives and insert worker struggles and gain sympathy (Chun, 2009; Fine, 2006; Schmalz et al, 2018). The point is workers have to frame their struggles and sell them to the society in terms of good or bad and erode an organizations credibility and exert pressure. The outcome is social movement unionism that enables creation of a discourse that speaks to needs of workers and society through cooperation (Fairbrother and Webster, 2008). Workers' have to use power strategically if their actions are to be effective and bear positive results.

Worker agency and power cannot be understood without space. It is therefore imperative to focus on how we can understand space and what it offers to workers and capital. Labor Geographers aver that space is not innocent and a lifeless stage but "...is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation" (Massey, 1993: 156). It can assist to understand the power geometry between capital and labor. Harvey (2006) submits that space can be classified into a 'tripartite division' as absolute, relative and relational or as a combination of these categories, depending upon context. Harvey (1973:13) considers absolute space as "... a thing in itself with an existence independent of matter." Space is fixed, pre-existing, immovable and individuals record or plan events within its frame i.e. Huntington mine in South Africa (Harvey, 2006:121). This includes physical objects like private and public buildings, nature and other things that we can see and touch. In other words, a spatial fix, for instance, is absolute space.

Using the lenses of Einstein and Euclidean geometries, Harvey (2006:121) states that relative space is the relationship existing between objects which exist only because objects exist and relate to each other. In the Euclidean sense, distance between two points remains the same i.e. Huntington mine offices and mining pits while for Einstein, forms of measurement depend on the observer's frame of reference (Harvey, 2006:121). For instance, a short distance from home to work that would take 20 minutes driving can sound far when it takes more time due to traffic congestion. In the same vein, distance between Pretoria and Cape Town could be 1200 kilometers by road and far, however, distance gets annihilated through improved modes of transport hence short travelling time or through other modes of telecommunication. Space is, therefore, relative in a double sense because there are multiple geometries to choose from the spatial frame (Harvey, 2006; Herod, 2012).

Relational space is an outcome of processes and actions of the past and the present like colonialism and apartheid in South Africa and how spatial engineering for social engineering shaped social relations. Relationality of space-time implies that social actors' collective memories about absolute or relative space cannot be framed in on maps or grids (absolute space) or through various circulation laws (relative space) but are experienced through social relations (Harvey, 2006). Thus, through lived space, external things are internalized thereby producing fantasies, frustration and desires that workers' have about absolute or relative space. In addition, they may also mobilize and coalesce into a group and articulate their demands on landscapes as in the case of some Huntington mineworkers. Given the above, power, space and agency are deployed as analytic tools to evaluate Huntington mineworkers' 2012 strike action.

Methodology

The data for this discussion was collected during a commissioned study for the above-mentioned mine where I was a researcher in a research team of seven. The commissioned study investigated the reasons for a strike action at Huntington mine that started on the 3rd of October and came to an end after two weeks. In addition, the study investigated levels of satisfaction/discontent within the workforce in terms of working conditions, employee benefits, remuneration, management style and trade unions representatives. Also, questions on the role of indebtedness, family, employee share scheme pay-outs, politics and union conflict to the strike action were asked. Huntington mine had been taken by surprise by this strike action because they had just concluded a two-year wage agreement with recognised organized labor for the collective bargaining category.

Data was generated through survey of 248 Huntington permanent employees within the collective bargaining category; in-depth interviews with key informants that include, shop stewards, selected employees, foremen, representatives of middle to top management, community leaders and observations. On the survey, workers were randomly selected, and we personally administered the survey questionnaires to elicit levels of jobs satisfaction in the workplace, reasons for the strike action and how it was handled. Questionnaires were personally administered on selected respondents at convenient locations within the mine. The survey data was analysed using Social Sciences Statistical Package using descriptive statistics. Follow up in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants. We also spent two months in the community talking to workers and community members as well as observing their daily activities when off-duty to understand issues surrounding the strike action and analysed qualitative data and corroborated it with survey data and compiled the report for Huntington mine.

Power, space and agency: successes and failures

The strike action undertaken by 200 plus workers at Huntington, involving the capture of mine trucks and some equipment and later joined by few fellow workers without official labor union support, can be categorized as ‘sporadic, informal and goal directed collective agency’ (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2010). It was informal because it was organized without following the proper labor relations procedures and workplace rules prescribed in section 64 of the Labor Relations Act of 1995 of the republic of South Africa and without official trade union approval. The wildcat action was goal-directed because the strikers wanted management’s attention, which they got although their demands on the memorandum were not met. It was undertaken by a group of workers from two shifts from the mining section and there was some level of collective agency to “... materially improve their conditions of existence...” (Coe and Jodhuis-Lier, 2011:216).

The wildcat strike action by Huntington mineworkers demonstrates a number of points in terms of low trust levels between trade unions and membership and inexperience; relations between mine management and labor and in-direct rejection of the current industrial relations system and inability of striking workers to effectively utilize power resources. Trade unions play an important role in protecting workers interests and articulating demands to the employer on behalf of the workers. The events leading to the outbreak of the unprotected strike action shows that mineworkers decided to take issues into their own hands after the recognized trade unions had supposedly failed to convince the mine to address their grievances. The NUM Huntington branch leadership had promised the workers that they would help them get back their ‘stolen’ money from the employee share scheme by the mine but did not succeed. These promises, based on allegations that had not been proven, raised expectations amongst the workers whose payouts were running out and feeling the pressure to sustain expensive lifestyles they had gotten accustomed to. Unmet expectations can result in frustration and anger as shown in this case. This demonstrates

questionable union leadership as it resulted in workers taking their own course of action that proved detrimental on their livelihoods (see Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout, 2008). Furthermore, the NUM Huntington branch skipped procedures and approached CCMA for dispute resolution without exhausting internal processes within the mine as set in workplace agreements and the LRA 1995.

Linked to the above, the paternalistic management style adopted by the mine management created fertile conditions for mineworkers to periodically make demands outside formally agreed procedures (Buhlungu et al, 2013 see also Moodie, 1994). The GM's open-door policy informalized industrial relations and mineworkers could walk into his office with grievances and requests without observing first line and middle-management. This resulted in first line and middle-management like Foremen and Mine Captains being undermined because the chain of command had been blurred. Lines of communication became disrupted and at the same time ignored. The idea to institutionalize workplace relations through a system of agreed upon rules and procedures enables labor and capital to interact effectively and settle disputes and grievances amicably (Gumede, 2015). In the case of Huntington, informalization of communication channels resulted in poor communication especially on employee share scheme taxes and other grievances, undermining of mine management and an already weak trade union leadership (Buhlungu et al, 2013). The outcome was poor handling of worker demands as depicted by flyers that threatened workers not to engage in unprotected strike action. These unresolved internal dynamics and events at Marikana convinced workers to initiate the wildcat strike without trade unions support and following procedures. Though the move was spectacular, it did not yield the desired results.

Huntington mine wildcat strike action by mining section workers was an indirect rejection of the corporatist inspired industrial relations system set up in South Africa (Chinguno, 2015). This is

evidenced by workers attempts to directly negotiate with mine management without trade unions, introducing new wage demands with an existing and valid two-year wage agreement still in place. Gumede (2015: 328) argues that the events at the platinum belt wave strikes broadly depict rejection of South Africa's democratic institutions established through a negotiated social contract. These institutions make up structures and socially embedded rules and procedures that help regulate for instance workplace and social relations. Labor as depicted by mineworkers at Huntington rejected existing industrial relations system i.e. workplace procedures when communicating grievances and disputes and wage agreements as they felt that the system failed them. Chinguno (2015) makes a similar argument that the strike action at Impala Platinum mine as part of the Marikana strike wave also demonstrates rejection of South Africa's industrial relations system as RDOs rejected NUM and negotiated directly with mine management during the strike. Consequently, at Huntington mine, the unprotected strike action by workers made them vulnerable to dismissal as stated in the LRA 1995 and hence failure of the strike action. Focus on the constellation and configuration power resources by the striking workers can shed more light on this conclusion.

The strike action failed to yield desired results despite workers having used space strategically because power was not used effectively. Events leading to the start of the strike action shows workers making use of associational and institutional power (Schmalz, et al, 2018; Silver, 2003). They channeled their grievances and demands through their trade unions and their members (associational power) within set workplace procedures (institutional power) as social actors with an interest on space. Due to distrust and pressure to sustain lifestyles ushered by employee share scheme pay-outs, workers abandoned these power resources without exhausting them and opted to negotiate directly with management (see Buhlungu, 2009). In this instance, recalibration of

relational space can be observed, however, the tactic fails to materialize as workers were advised through the two memorandums to follow formal channels. By abandoning associational power, they deprived themselves of human resources *via* trade union members and organizational efficiency through trade union aligned workplace structures (Schmalz et al, 2018). At the same time, the shift from institutional power and abandonment of associational power demonstrates the constraints of capital on labour.

Striking workers invoked the reworking strategy to “...recalibrate power relations and or redistribute...” resources in the workplace was aided by structural power (workers location on the point of production) at Huntington mine (Cumber, Helms and Swanson, 2010; Katz, 2004: 247; Lambert et al. 2012; Schmalz et al, 2018; Wright, 2000;). They disrupted and stopped production for two weeks using their capacity to disrupt and refused to work until the GM had addressed them. They enforced both workplace bargaining power by stopping production, market place bargaining power using their position in the production process as Operators central to iron ore extraction in primary production together with logistical power where they assembled over 90% of mining production (blasting, load and haul process) equipment and machinery into one place. In terms of relational space, their experience and knowledge of working in the pits enabled them to capture and control space. They also blocked access into all mining areas (into the open pits). This was spectacular and effective for a while given the effort Operators invested in assembling all the equipment and machinery. For a moment, they had the momentum, however, tables turned when Huntington mine stopped all production at the plant, engineering and support services and instructed workers not to report for duty. The pendulum swung because power is relational as capital can draw from the same power resources (Brookes, 2018; Schmalz, et al, 2018). The striking workers became isolated and fellow workers could not join them as the mine had been

cordoned off, hence weakening their associational power due to limited number of striking workers.

Furthermore, though the workers spatial strategy in terms of choice of location i.e. mine dumps gave them a vantage point to movements of mine's private security and the South African Police Services officers in making attempts to re-capture mine property. The workers made use of relative and absolute space as they are responsible for the construction of landscapes. They understood the power of absolute space and harnessed through logistical power in articulating their class struggles as a locus of control. The mobile space (trucks, machinery and equipment) and the parking space constitute a landscape in which workers are embedded thus used it as a choking point (Castree, Coe, Ward and Samers, 2004). Also, the location was strategic because striking workers could exit without being noticed into a nearby residential settlement to get supplies. Paradoxically, the same space that empowered them also constrained their political praxis as they were geographically isolated from fellow workmates and the society. Though capture of mine property and articulation of class struggles demonstrates worker agency, the unprotected strike lacked planning, organization and leadership. The striking workers acted out of anger, detached themselves from worker structures and their respective trade unions depriving themselves of associational power and important ingredient that unites workers into a collective unit (Brinkmann and Nachtwey, 2010; Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000). Though it could be argued that it was a strategy to take the employer by surprise since it was an unprotected strike action, it weakened their power base. Strike action is an art of war that requires, resources, leadership, planning and organization and these were absent at the Huntington strike.

Given the fragmented nature of the strike action, workers could not unite with those locked out from the mine including the society. Societal power plays a fundamental role in forging solidarities

between workers and the society and intensify worker struggles (Schmalz, et al, 2018). Societal power through coalitional power and discursive power would have enabled striking workers scale their struggles horizontally into the community and use it as battlefield that the mine does not control (Brookes, 2013; Levesque and Murray, 2013; Schmalz et al, 2018). A few community members and workers made attempts to stage protests near the mine, but Huntington was granted a court interdict. As days progressed without signs of the GM coming to address striking workers, frustration and disunity crept in and some workers went back home. Out of desperation, remaining workers threatened to run down company trucks and destroy them if their demands were not met. Attempts to destroy company property and other forms of sabotage depict inadequacy of limited forms of power hence resort to acts of violence (see Von Holdt, 2010). Furthermore, lack of adequate power through various configurations and political suppression can constrain worker agency (Webster et al, 2008). Huntington mine gave workers an ultimatum to exit the property and avoid criminal charges or loss of jobs, but they did not yield. Evidently, in response to threats to destroy Huntington mine's machinery and equipment, the mine's private security and SAPS on the dawn of the 16th of October after 14 days of impasse, moved in and forcefully arrested striking workers and re-possessed company property (Buhlungu et al, 2013). The arrested workers were criminally charged, and others faced disciplinary action. The strike action came to an end without any victory for the workers.

After the strike action, workers were called for disciplinary hearings. Some attended while others did not and 120 lost their jobs and income. This was a big blow because they no longer had income to service their bank-financed houses, cars and other accounts. Banks repossessed their motor-vehicles and houses. Their demands were not met and instead lost their jobs. This case depicts unsuccessful worker action. Having considered the above, it is also reasonable to look at platinum

belt strikes and draw some comparisons. Wildcat strikes initiated and led by RDOs on the platinum belt were successful because RDOs carry social power and historical residue to galvanize the rest of the workforce while Operators at Huntington mine did not possess such (Stewart, 2013, 2016). Furthermore, the game of numbers, machines and equipment and technology constrained Operators who at any point during a shift are around 300 in the mining area in comparison to platinum mine's thousands of workers at any point underground (see Chinguno, 2015; Sinwell, 2015). Wildcat strike action on the platinum belt was well organized with proper planning through worker committees (associational power in the form of grassroot structure), something that was absent at Huntington mine strike (see Sinwell, 2015). Also, the striking workers staged their struggles outside the mine property tapping into various forms of power resources including societal power in the communities. However, both strikes share similarities in terms of dissatisfaction and rejection of the corporatist inspired industrial relations system, its related structures and the minimum wage at entry level (Sinwell, 2013).

Conclusion

Considering the above analysis, this case study of Huntington mine's wildcat strike in 2012 shows that workers are place-based and the actions they take in articulating their vision on social and economic landscapes are spatially embedded (Castree et al, 2004; Herod, 2012). In addition, workers have agency and depending with geographical conditions and workplace relations, contest with capital to control space. Ability to control space is a source of power (Herod, 2001). In this case study, it has also been shown that workers draw their power from different power resources (Brookes, 2003; Lambert et al, 2012; Schmalz et al, 2018; Silver, 2003; Webster et al, 2008; Wright, 2000). It is also important to note that for power to be effective, it has to be used effectively through various combinations and configurations including structural power, associational power,

institutional power and societal power (Schmalz et al, 2018). The Huntington wildcat strike was a failure because workers failed to strategically use different sets of power at different times depending with the situation. Workers exclusion of associational power and societal power left them vulnerable to failure because they lacked leadership, organisation, human resources from fellow workers and the broader community.

Though their location was strategic through logistical power aided by their knowledge and understanding of production space, they isolated themselves from fellow workers who were not aware of the strike action because it was a wildcat strike and hence fragmented them and became devoid of solidarity. As result the strike action was a failure because their demands were not met by Huntington mine, they got arrested and criminally charged, lost their jobs and properties that were bank financed. Thus, for worker agency to be successful, labor has to use space and deploy power effectively and consolidate it strategically at different intervals because power is relational and not permanent. Lastly, the study also suggests that though space is important, it can be isolating as well as empowering.

Notes

¹Strike action undertaken by unionized workers without knowledge and approval of their trade unions.

² Pseudonym.

³In South Africa, right to strike as provided in the Constitution of the Republic S 23 (2) c. The right to strike in South Africa for employees and right to lock out for employers is given effect through Labor Relations Act 1995 S64 (1) and is protected if issue in dispute has been referred to dispute resolution council or the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration and

granted a certificate that the matter has remained unresolved for 30 days; and then give 48 hours' notice to strike to the employer. An unprotected or wild cat strike happens when the above procedures have not been followed and can result in dismissal (s).

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