

Did Marikana change the face of bargaining?

Wage increase demands have risen as unions face a credibility crisis

GEORGE MATLALA

WHAT was deemed one of South Africa's most monumental post-apartheid tragedies, 34 people died in a hail of bullets in the wake of an industrial dispute in Marikana, Rustenburg, more than a year ago.

But behind the painful images of police firing at striking mineworkers, who were armed to the teeth, is the reality that the country's industrial relations scene changed irrevocably that week.

And although the commission of inquiry set up by President Jacob Zuma will get to the bottom of exactly what happened on that fateful day in August last year, that reality still haunts the country's labour negotiations.

Two weeks after the one-year commemoration of the Marikana shootings, the question that lingers is: just how much did Marikana impact on the industrial relation landscape and, specifically, the bargaining scene?

The questions come at the onset of the latest bargaining season, which is tough on an unprecedented scale.

Currently, workers in the mining, automotive and aviation sectors are steadfast in their demands for double-digit increases in wages, a situation that has put collective bargaining in the country under strain.

The embattled National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is putting up a big fight to have significant salary increases this year, going as far as asking for 60 percent from gold producers Anglo-Gold Ashanti and Sibanye for entry-level miners.

Its bitter rival, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu), is demanding increases of at least 100 percent for all unskilled and semi-skilled employees in the gold sector.

This includes a demand of a minimum entry level wage of R12 500 for underground workers and R11 500 for surface workers.

Gold producers are preparing themselves for bruising strikes that could start as early as today after NUM walked out of deadlocked wage talks with employers earlier last week.

NUM is also mounting a serious war in the construction sector, where it is demanding a 15 percent wage hike, while employers are only offering 7 percent.

The demand for a steep rise in wages is part of NUM's long-standing fight to have gold sector employers overhaul the salaries of entry-level workers.

NUM's counterpart, the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa), on the other hand, has also sharpened its fight against employers in terms of its demands.

The metalworkers' union, now Cosatu's biggest affiliate, is conducting a crippling strike in the automotive sector.

The union said its leaders would meet tomorrow to mull over a new offer made by car manufacturers.

This was after about 30 000 workers from seven vehicle manufacturing plants downed tools a week ago, demanding a 14 percent wage increase.

At the same time, the SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) is

embroiled in an industrial dispute with national airline SAA.

Last week Satawu members at the OR Tambo International Airport vowed they would not accept anything below a double-digit wage increase, having initially asked for a 14 percent salary hike. Satawu, like NUM, is facing a challenge from a splinter union, the National Transport Movement.

But what does NUM, Numsa and

Satawu's militancy and demands for double-digit wage increases mean for the country's bargaining scene and industrial relations this year and going forward?

Labour expert professor Sakhela Buhlungu says Marikana has changed the face of bargaining in the country and put a spotlight on the country's labour relations.

"Some of it (double-digit demands)

is completely unprecedented. In the mining sector, unions are trying to bend over backwards to accommodate pressure.

"Unions are facing a serious credibility crisis.

"The question is: are they doing enough? This question has never been asked in the past 30 years," he said.

Buhlungu said this was the worst labour unrest in the country, signalling that the system of collective bargaining would need to be reviewed to adjust to the fact that some of the unions were losing credibility in the eyes of their members.

Workers' attitudes, Buhlungu noted, were hardened by the fact they were facing economic difficulties, with the local and global economies not growing.

Buhlungu said the 22 percent increase at Marikana had made workers think that they should push harder for bigger salary increases.

"Marikana opened floodgates, with workers saying that there is money out there.

"They now think with a little bit of a push, they can get more."

However, business has also had to shoulder the blame for the current labour unrest after their failure to pay workers well.

"Employers think they can do business as usual.

"The reality is that there is a long-overdue redress of workers' salaries.

"They (employers) are not dealing with the wage structure inherited from the colonial apartheid system.

The gap between what managers get and workers is wide. It means workers will not stop demanding," he said.

"The reality is that all these things are catching up," he added.

But for political analyst Moeletsi Mbeki, the hardened attitudes of workers are informed by the realisation of the country's inequalities and the stagnating economy.

"We are having a bigger and bigger section of our society being outsiders. Our economy is shrinking, giving privilege to a few. This (Marikana and demands for big salary increases) is the consequence of inequality growing," he said.

Last week, Mbeki's Forum for Public Debates released a survey of Cosatu shop stewards, which showed that there was a "dramatic increase in workplace violence and community unrest, which culminated in Marikana".

But what could be behind these demands?

The urgency with which NUM, as an example, is now pursuing the wage increases after it lost control of the platinum belt to upstart union Amcu in Marikana is indicative of a union in troubled waters.

Following years of failure to service members and perceptions of a growing distance between its leaders and members, NUM is now facing unprecedented pressure to protect its standing in society.

NUM, a political force and an incubator of leaders for the ANC, is fac-

ing a credibility challenge on a scale unseen before.

And the union's battle for salary overhauls in the gold sector is but one of the efforts to retain some modicum of credibility in the face of a stiff challenge from Amcu.

Such is the militancy of NUM that its spokesman, Lesiba Seshoka, commented last week: "The companies that the strike action is going to be against are the companies that have stolen so much money from us through collusion.

"Clearly, we want them to share with the poor workers in the industry."

NUM is hellbent on not losing support to Amcu in the gold and construction sector, informed by its painful

But it is clear that Amcu has now become such a force that ANC deputy secretary-general Jessie Duarte even commented last week that the ruling party had not ruled out a possibility of talking to it.

"There's no reason why we should not talk to Amcu. Members of Amcu are voters and some of them vote for the ANC," she said last week.

Her comments were in stark contrast to those of tripartite alliance leaders, who have maintained that Amcu's attack on NUM was an attack on the ANC.

SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande even went to the extent of calling Amcu a "vigilante union"

and ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe has been seen to be part of the band that has been attacking the new union.

Duarte's comments, however, appear to be an indication that the ANC has come to realise that Amcu could sway its supporters from voting for it at next year's general elections, amid fears that emerging parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) wanted to take advantage of the situation.

The EFF was founded on the back of the unrest in the mining sector, particularly in Marikana.

Amcu has so far not clearly given indication of its political home, which explains the ANC stepping down its attacks on the new union.

Numsa does not want to drop the ball like NUM, although it is not facing similar challenges of servicing members.

Its militancy – having conducted a strike for more than a week – and demands of a double-digit increase are indicative of a union that knows that a weak bargaining strategy with small increases in wages could render it unpopular with workers.

As things stand, Numsa is facing isolation from within Cosatu and the tripartite alliance.

Its continued support for suspended Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi has earned it a lot of enemies.

And its clashes with private companies are born out of bitterness that the ANC was soft on "monopoly capital" and that Zuma was no longer the standard-bearer of the workers.

Labour expert Professor Edward Webster said the weaknesses and divisions in unions had led to violence in strikes.

He noted that the splitting of Cosatu unions was a "problematic" new phenomenon and would not help unions in their fights against bosses.

Both Webster and Mbeki concurred that unions were poorly organised nowadays, when compared with the early 1990s.

A fortnight ago, Mantashe told The Sunday Independent that a "weak Cosatu is bad generally, not (only) for the elections.

"It is bad for industrial relations." Although Mantashe did not elaborate, it would appear that Marikana and this year's round of wage negotiations are a sign that industrial relations are bad.

It is clear that the blood of the Marikana workers has not only put a spotlight on the country's economic inequalities, but has, changed the collective bargaining system irrevocably, with workers now violently pushing to share in the wealth of the country.

sons stemming from Marikana last year.

Days after the Marikana massacre, workers accepted a hefty pay

rise of 22 percent from Lonmin's management, which had been engineered by Amcu through a series of wildcat, violent strikes in the platinum belt.

"It's a huge achievement. No union has achieved a 22 percent increase before," Zolisa Bodlani, a worker representative at Marikana, said at the time.