Platinum Producer Fires Striking Miners

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JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Anglo American Platinum fired 12,000 striking miners Friday for staging an unlawful strike that is one of several that are slowly paralyzing South Africa's crucial mining sector.

About 80,000 miners, representing 16 percent of the country's mine workforce, are currently striking in a wave of wildcat work stoppages that have serious economic and political implications for South Africa.

Strike leader Gaddafi Mdoda, a mineworker at Anglo American Platinum, or Amplats, said he was one of the workers who received emails or SMS messages telling them they had been dismissed.

"Things are bad here," Mdoda said. The strike leader said he was shocked by the decision to dismiss striking workers, even though "it is nothing to be afraid of."

"Approximately 12,000 striking employees chose not to make representations, nor attend the hearings, and have therefore been dismissed in their absence," a statement from Amplats said, according to the South African Press Agency.

Mary Jane Morifi, a spokeswoman for Anglo American Platinum declined to comment, saying a detailed statement would be issued later Friday.

Violence has been reported at the company's Rustenburg mines, with police firing tear gas and rubber bullets Thursday to disperse striking miners armed with sticks and other crude weapons. A striking miner's dead body was discovered Friday morning, the apparent victim of rubber bullets to the stomach, said Mdoda.

Amplats is the world's largest platinum producer and South Africa produces 75 percent of the world's platinum.

The ANC Youth League, reacting to the dismissal of striking mineworkers, described Amplats as "a disgrace and a disappointment to the country at large, a representation of white monopoly capital out of touch and uncaring of the plight of the poor."

The Youth League said the mass firings "demonstrates the insensibility and insensitivity of the company ... which has made astronomical profits on the blood, sweat and tears of the very same workers that today the company can just fire with impunity."

Mdoda, the strike leader, said the fired miners would intensify their strike, even if they were no longer bona fide employees of Amplats. At least 20,000 mineworkers at Amplats have been staging a wildcat strike since Sept. 12, demanding 12,500 rand (about $1,500) in take-home pay. Amplats managers said from the start that

the strike, which brought the company's operations in Rustenburg to a standstill, is unlawful.

South Africa's mining industry has been in turmoil since August, when mineworkers at a platinum mine staged a wildcat strike that led to police shooting and killing 34 workers in Marikana, shocking a nation that had not witnessed such a level of violence since the end of apartheid.

There seems to be no end in sight to the labor unrest, which has spread to coal and iron ore mines as well as to the road freight sector. Some 20,000 truckers demanding a 22 percent pay raise are currently staging a strike that threatens the supply of gas and groceries. Negotiations between striking truckers and the Road Freight Association "broke down" Thursday night, according to Vincent Masoga, a spokesman for the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union, which called the strike.

Masoga said the union would keep the strike going until negotiations resume. The Road Freight Employers Association, which has offered the truckers a pay increase of up to 8.5 percent, said Friday it had obtained a court order compelling the truckers' union to manage its strike in a way that avoids violence of the sort that has led to some trucks being set on fire.

"In essence, the order made it tougher on the unions to continue with irregular strike action," the Road Freight Association, which lost an application to block the strike from proceeding, said in a statement Friday.

The labor unrest has damaged South Africa's reputation as an investment destination. South Africa produces 75 percent of the world's platinum and is the No. 4 chrome producer and the fifth-biggest gold producer.

South African President Jacob Zuma, the target of criticism by mineworkers who see him as aloof to their concerns, said Thursday that the violence witnessed in the mining sector was proof that "a climate of constructive social dialogue" needs to be created in the country.

"We should not seek to portray ourselves as a nation that is perpetually fighting," Zuma told South Africa's Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

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