

Opinion - Lonmin should have listened- Business Report

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By Rev Jo Seoka

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Bishop Jo Seoka engaged with striking Lonmin miners at Marikana near Rustenburg this month to try to prevent brewing anger from resulting in violent deaths. Photo: Phill Magakoe

The killings at Marikana could have been avoided if Lonmin's management had listened to the workers' concerns. There was no need for the strike – let alone the violence that led to the loss of 44 lives.

A democracy should provide for the human rights of all citizens, including the right to decent work, a living wage and collective bargaining. South Africa won its democratic character through negotiations, where people came together to discuss their way towards a solution for the common good of all. For this reason, the nation and the world was shocked at the news of the brutal killings of the people who dig up the wealth of this country.

Platinum is one of the most precious resources the country has to use for its development. Our constitution is said to be one of the best in the world, but the majority of citizens are yet to enjoy the freedom provided by the constitution.

On our visit to the Marikana mines on August 16 we first made contact with the strikers on the koppie. Having introduced ourselves, we asked how we could help to resolve the conflict that at that point had already cost 10 lives.

The spokesperson for the workers asked that we convey their desire for the employer to come and address them. The workers asked specifically for Mr Ian Farmer, the chief executive, whom they called "umqashi" (boss). Without promising them anything we left to ask Mr Farmer to come with us to talk to the strikers.

At the mine offices we met three managers who told us that workers could not see Farmer as he was not in the country, but sick in London. We asked if someone could address the strikers in his place, but (we) were told the management would not talk to criminals because they had killed security staff.

We pleaded with them, ultimately (a) meeting with Lieutenant-General Zukiswa Mbombo who told us that security was a concern, and this was not negotiable. She left us with the management who told us to inform the strikers that management would only talk to them if they:

I Surrendered their weapons;

I Elected between five and eight people to represent them; and

I Dispersed from the koppie.

As we left, one manager told us that we could not go back to the koppie as it was now a security-risk area under the police. We headed for the road back to Gauteng and fifteen minutes later my cellphone rang. A voice on the other side said: "The police are killing us."

We heard bullets but (we) were helpless. The following day we saw on the pictures of one of the leaders we spoke with lying dead – the man in the green blanket.

Here's a country that claims to promote dialogue, while being at war with itself.

How can we forget so soon how we have arrived at where we are today? There is an African proverb that says things are corrected through talking. People are encouraged to talk about their differences instead of resorting to fighting. It is for this reason that we believe the mine management could have done things differently.

It is not a matter of who shot at whom first – important as this question is – but rather finding a solution to save more lives from violence and to address the flaws in our democratic society.

On Monday, August 20, we went back to Marikana to consult with the local clergy on how best we could be of help to those who had died in the violence. About four church leaders resolved that we must go and talk with the workers.

After addressing them we asked the management if they could talk to the strikers. Ultimately, executive vice-president Bernard Mokwena agreed to meet the strikers' delegation. We left to convince the strikers to meet with the executives.

It took about five hours to negotiate a safe place where the talks could take place. Late in the afternoon we brought the two parties under one roof and talks started.

On Tuesday we reconvened. The strikers' delegates put their demands before the management team who received them and asked that they be given a chance to study and discuss them before giving answers the following day. It was not an easy meeting but there was understanding and willingness to engage each other.

On Wednesday we met again to get the management's response. The management tried to give answers and the delegation received them and promised to give them to their members. Notwithstanding, on Wednesday the two parties agreed on the need for mourning and that talks be postponed until after the memorial service and funeral, but that talks would resume on Monday, August 27. Talks were mutual and cordial all along, which proves that talking can bring about understanding and resolution to a very difficult issue.

The judicial commission, established by President Jacob Zuma, is welcomed. We hope it will be able to consult widely to reveal the truth about the Marikana killings. This has to be done in the context of widespread poverty, exclusion and profiteering at any cost.

The management and church leaders have talked and agreed on building peace during the talks. However, we are now taken aback to learn that the Minister of Labour, Lonmin management and trade unions have made different arrangements to address the issue. This disrupts the talks and trust already established. We do not believe that leaving the workers outside this peace process will yield any lasting fruits, but rather more problems.

As church leaders we are careful not to be used for personal ends, but to help bring about a sustainable solution and peace at the workplace.

The workers have repeatedly asked to be taken seriously and for access to engage constructively with the management. Short cut solutions are not likely to last, but to cause more trouble. The solution lies in bosses engaging in collective bargaining with the striking workers. If a solution is not found that includes the striking workers, workers will maintain their suspicion that management is not interested in them – only committed to pleasing shareholders through resuming production.

The Marikana incident is a reminder and an opportunity for the nation to take stock of the state of affairs in our democratic dispensation. What has gone wrong, we must ask ourselves. It is futile to talk about social cohesion and the need for dialogue when we are not communicating with each other.

Why did we vote and for whom did we cast our vote if those we put into power are not at the service of the people, but rather themselves? People should not be dying at the hands of the police who are employed to protect the nation.

The wealth of this nation must benefit all its citizens, not just few. Together we must work for equality and fair distribution of resources if we are to close the gap between rich and poor. Education, jobs and development are critical areas of focus if we are to provide decent lives for all people in South Africa.

We suggest that collective bargaining be used in line with labour laws so that negotiations create a peaceful work environment. This process must not be delayed but carefully crafted to find a lasting solution involving the strikers.

Management must continue to talk to workers while they seek trade union representation. Care must be taken that the social ills that result from unacceptable living and working conditions are addressed.

The recent study of the Bench Marks Foundation has predicted the problems now seen at Marikana. If all the mining houses had addressed the underlying causes of unrest and provided both workers and local communities with the opportunity to live a decent life, the killings could have been avoided.

-Right Reverend Doctor Jo Seoka, an Anglican bishop, is the chairman of Bench Marks Foundation and the president of the SA Council of Churches.