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The shifting dynamics of the relations between institutionalisation and strike violence: a case study of Impala Platinum, Rustenburg (1982-2012)

Chinguno, Crispen

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the shifting patterns of institutionalisation of industrial relations and violence in strikes over a period of thirty years, shaped by the transition from apartheid to democracy. It draws from an ethnographic study of Impala Platinum mine between 1982 and 2012 and some analysis of the Lonmin Platinum strike in 2012. It traces the trajectory of institutionalisation from the period of apartheid despotism, the transition to inclusive and participatory industrial relations system, through to the second decade after the democratic transition. The overriding aim of this study which is informed by theories of institutionalisation of industrial relations is to understand how workplace order is attained, sustained, challenged and change overtime. This dissertation argues that the institutionalisation of industrial relations is highly unstable, precarious and generates new forms of conflict and worker solidarity. It is continuously being (re)configured, and violence is part of this making, remaking and unmaking of order. This cycle informs the nature and repertoires of strike violence. This thesis shows the ambiguity of institutionalisation of industrial relations as a source of power. It simultaneously empowers and dis-empowers. It confers rights and at the same time constrains how the rights may be exercised. The broader context shaping the South African labour relations before the democratic transition was informed by apartheid which produced a despotic labour regime and an insurgent trade unionism characterised by various forms of violence. This resulted in institutionalisation of negotiations and recognition of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) at Impala Platinum in Rustenburg. This process of institutionalising industrial relations and bureaucratisation of the union happened in the context of broader national democratic transition and shift to an industrial democracy. The NUM evolved into a dominant and highly institutionalised union at Impala Platinum and nationally. The industrial relations shifted

from non-hegemonic to a hegemonic system in which class relations were sustained through consent. Consequently, insurgent trade unionism was institutionalised but ironically crystallised into a class compromise which undermined the attainment of union goals. This simultaneously generated some elements of insurgent trade unionism from below by 2009. The study observed that insurgent trade unionism characterised by informal structures and networks challenging the institutionalisation of industrial relations was renewed or reinvigorated reasserting resistance to the co-option of the union by 2012. The primary contribution of this thesis is that it develops a typology explicating the variations of institutionalisation of industrial relations and violence in strikes over time, capturing different and complex power relations: 'ideal institutionalisation', 'de-institutionalisation' and 're-institutionalisation'. Ideal institutionalisation of industrial relations crystallizes a particular balance of organisational and institutional power and when this is disturbed it may be (re)configured. Ideal institutionalisation is attained and sustained where organisational power commensurate with institutional power. Moreover, if the balance dissipates and or is not sustained, there is bound to be a shift/backlash towards de-institutionalisation or unmaking of institutionalisation of industrial relations. The transition of institutionalisation of industrial relations is a function of power play between capital and labour mediated by the state and tied to worker agency. This thesis sheds light on how worker agency continually changes shaping the industrial relations and how a diverse workforce attempts to overcome divisions and fragmentation through forging solidarity including utilising coercive means, conceptualised as a 'violent solidarity'.

Key words: institutionalisation, strike violence, industrial relations, trade union, insurgent unionism, violence.