

# **Take Back What's Yours: the Mine-Line Occupation**

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The economic crisis in South Africa has seen inequalities, and the forced misery of the working class, grow. While the rich and politicians have continued to flaunt their ill-gotten wealth, workers and the poor have been forced to suffer. It is in this context that the majority of the leaders of the largest trade unions have, unfortunately, elected to once again place their faith in a social dialogue and partnerships with big business and the state<sup>1</sup>. So while the state and bosses have been on the offensive against workers and the poor, union officials have been appealing to them to save jobs during the crisis. Not surprisingly, this strategy has largely failed. While union leaders and technocrats have been debating about the policies that should or should not be taken to overcome the crisis, bosses and the state have retrenched over 1 million workers in a bid to increase profits<sup>2</sup>. It is, therefore, sheer folly for union leaders to believe that the state and bosses are interested in compromise – without being forced into it. As seen by their actions, the elite are only interested in maintaining their power, wealth and lifestyles by making the workers and the poor pay for the crisis. For the elite, social dialogue is simply a tool to tie the unions up and limit their real strength – direct action by members. In fact, even before the crisis, social dialogue had been a disaster for the unions contributing towards their bureaucratisation and having abysmal results in terms of them trying to influence the state away from its pro-rich macro-economic policies<sup>3</sup>.

## The Mine-Line occupation erupts

On the 20<sup>th</sup> October last year, it became clear just how powerful direct action could be during the crisis, as opposed to trusting in social dialogue. On that day, 107 workers occupied a factory on Johannesburg's West Rand, Mine-Line/ TAP Engineering (Mine-Line). The roots of the occupation of Mine-Line were set when the owner, Wynand Mulder, voluntarily liquidated the company in August 2010. He was doing so in a bid to escape responsibly for the deaths of three workers, who were killed in an accident at the factory due to lax health and safety standards<sup>4</sup>.

Before officially declaring insolvency, Mulder went about systematically looting the company – in a microcosm of how the elite have looted the South African economy at large. As part of this, Mulder withdrew R 15 million from the company's account, along with taking a loan of R 35 million from ABSA Bank, shortly before liquidating it. With these ill gotten gains, Mulder – with the sheer arrogance that only the rich have – bought a fleet of luxury cars and a helicopter. This all took place in the context where workers at the factory, along with their families, were left with nothing<sup>5</sup>. Not even their final salaries or the benefits that were due to them were paid. Not merely content with this, Mulder began removing machines and other equipment from the premises, with the aim of re-opening a new factory in a different name.

It was this, and the example of factory occupations in other regions of the world, that led the workers at the factory – who are members of the Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (MEWUSA) – to begin the occupation. They were determined that they would not

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Walt, L. Saving jobs in South Africa in the crunch: 'engage' or revolt. [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net) 20<sup>th</sup> April 2009

<sup>2</sup> [www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com) 15<sup>th</sup> October 2010

<sup>3</sup> Maria van Driel. 2005. Social Dialogue, Neoliberalism and Trade Unions in South Africa. *Khanya: A Journal For Activists*. No. 8, pp. 27–29

<sup>4</sup> [www.socialistworld.net](http://www.socialistworld.net) 26<sup>th</sup> October 2010

<sup>5</sup> Khuzwayo, W. Workers sit tight at bankrupt firm. *The Sunday Independent*. 14<sup>th</sup> November 2010

be retrenched during the crisis, and decided that they would not let Mulder get away with his actions – as so many other bosses have been able to do since 2008. As part of this, the Mine-Line workers began guarding the factory day and night to stop Mulder removing any more machines and equipment. They kept this up for over a month, and it proved to be a highly important measure as Mulder and his son on numerous occasions returned to the factory, sometimes with hired security guards, to try and plunder it even further<sup>6</sup>. By December, however, the workers encountered an obstacle. Their resources were running low and they experienced a delay, due to union bureaucracy and a lull over the holiday period, in securing money for basic necessities from their union to maintain a physical presence in the factory. The result was that the physical occupation of the factory was ended in December, although weekly meetings are still held on the premises by the workers.

In fact, throughout the fight to keep some form of control over the factory, the workers have encountered an impediment in the form of the union leadership. The union claims to have been providing the workers with R 1 200 a week in order to sustain themselves and their families during the occupation<sup>7</sup>. Reportedly, however, the union had only paid over three payments to the workers, and it was suspected that the union leadership may have siphoned off the rest. Added to this, workers have reportedly also been afraid that the union's leadership have been receiving funds from the liquidators of Mine-Line to ensure that the company could be liquidated, and sold over the workers' heads to an investor. Matters came to a head when the Mine-Line workers' delegates, and other sympathetic left leaning members of MEWUSA, raised a protest against the corruption of the leadership at a MEWUSA National Congress in March 2011. In response, the leadership called in security guards and the police to silence dissenting voices and end the meeting. As part of the Congress, a new leadership was also meant to be elected, but with its premature closing, the old leadership unconstitutionally appointed their hand picked successors<sup>8</sup>. At the time of writing the union was in limbo; and from the leadership's side there appeared to be very little real will to assist the Mine-Line workers.

The main goal of the workers in initially undertaking the occupation was to try and save their jobs, and to win the benefits owed to them. As part of this, the workers were explicit about their wish to take over the factory permanently, restart production and run the factory based on workers' control<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, their aim is to run the factory as a worker co-operative and they have embarked upon a process of trying to register it as a co-operative with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Linked to this, they have also approached this state Department for R 350 000 in funding. In all of this, they have been assisted by a non-governmental organisation, the Co-operative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC). In preparation for approaching the DTI, COPAC also provided workers with training around co-operative principles, the registration process, and marketing. Thus, the workers have decided to take a legal route in order to gain control over Mine-Line.

In attempting to embark on a legal route, the workers have inevitably faced various barriers. The liquidators of Mine-Line had delayed the handing over key documents and records that were

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<sup>6</sup> [www.sacsis.org.za](http://www.sacsis.org.za) 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2010

<sup>7</sup> It is not clear whether this is or is not the case, but it was claimed by the leadership of MEWUSA during the National Congress of March 2011

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication ZACF comrades

<sup>9</sup> MEWUSA Statement on the Mine-Line/TAP Engineering occupation. [www.mewusa.org.za](http://www.mewusa.org.za) 18<sup>th</sup> November 2010

needed to establish a co-operative. Indeed, the workers only received the documents after a lengthily process. Added to this, the factory itself is located on property owned by the giant mining company, Harmony Gold. The workers have been attempting to negotiate a lease with Harmony Gold, but feel that they can only do so effectively once they have DTI funding and are able to show that they can restart production. In fact, Harmony Gold has started taking measures to try to evict the workers<sup>10</sup>. With such legal barriers in place, workers are once again discussing undertaking direct action to win what they need. This, perhaps, is a hopeful sign, as it was direct action that gained workers physical control over the factory in the first place; not the law. Direct action may also place pressure on both the liquidators and Harmony to consent to some of the workers' demands.

As an outcome of the occupation a solidarity committee was also established to offer support to the workers involved. Various organisations and initiatives like the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front, Landless People's Movement in Protea South, Conference for a Democratic Left/Democratic Left Front (CDL/DLF), COPAC, Concerned Wits Students and Academics, and Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM) have become involved in solidarity and support work around the occupation. This seems to have been important as it has led to resources being mustered, it has enabled awareness around the occupation to be raised, and it has involved groupings and individuals providing information and materials to the workers.

## To nationalise?

As part of their involvement in support work around the occupation, a number of left organisations – such as sections of the CDL/DLF, DSM and MEWUSA – have said that the ultimate goal of the occupation is for Mine-Line to be nationalised under workers' control<sup>11</sup>. This call for nationalisation under worker's control in part derives from a critique – which has some validity – that co-operatives run by workers can't indefinitely continue to exist as worker self-managed institutions within a market system. The main argument is that market forces, such as competition, will undermine democracy and lead to the resumption of capitalist relations of production in the enterprise. The solution, which sections of the CDL/DLF, DSM and MEWUSA therefore hold is for the state to take over ownership and guarantee resources to Mine-Line, but at the same time for it to allow workers' control of the factory. This, it is argued, would alleviate the worst effects of the market on such industries, and at the same time perform as a training ground for socialism<sup>12</sup>. Calling for such action, whether at Mine-Line or any other factory, does however raise certain issues relating to the nature of states – in this context the existing South African state – and the power dynamics between states and workers in general; something that those making the call for nationalisation under workers' control often brush over.

One fundamental mistake that those calling for the nationalisation of Mine-Line seem to make is that they often misread the fundamental character of all states. They often acknowledge that states exist for one class to rule over another. States are, however, more than this. All states, whether they claim to be capitalist or 'socialist', exist so that a **minority** can rule over a majority. They are the primary instrument through which this minority rule is exercised. Entire sections of

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication ZACF comrades

<sup>11</sup> [ccs.ukzn.ac.za](http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za) 27 October 2010

<sup>12</sup> [www.socialistsouthafrica.co.za](http://www.socialistsouthafrica.co.za)

the state, such as the courts, the military, and the police exist to enforce this rule and if necessary eliminate people who threaten it. As such, all states are oppressive and hierarchical. States don't and will never allow for direct democracy to exist. Even under representative democracy, an elite still decides over the lives and destinies of the majority, and then uses the state to enforce those decisions. States are, therefore, not neutral entities or potential allies of the oppressed; they are rather part of the oppression of the majority of people<sup>13</sup>. It is a fundamental mistake to believe otherwise. Certainly, concessions can be won from states through struggle, but ultimately states will never allow for freedom – it is not their purpose. It is in such a context that the call for the nationalisation of Mine-Line under workers' control needs to be evaluated.

When one considers the nature of the South African state, questions about what would actually be gained by it nationalising Mine-Line need to be thought out. Over the years, whether in its apartheid or post-apartheid guise, the state has repeatedly unleashed a series of attacks on workers and the poor. Within the last few months it has even been attempting to classify vast amounts of information to squash the public's limited knowledge regarding its operations, expenditures, and failings. In the industries it has not yet privatised, it has been involved in attacking workers through driving down wages and cutting jobs. Exploitation within state-owned enterprises is, at the very least, on par with that which occurs in the private sector – both operate under the oppressive and hierarchical logic of capitalism. In South Africa, state-owned companies – whether in the apartheid or post-apartheid period – have been highly oppressive towards workers. Without a doubt, therefore, the state's interests are the antithesis of those of the workers involved in the occupation. As part of ensuring the continued rule by an elite minority, the South African state's goals are to safeguard the sanctity of private property and to put measures in place for the capitalist economy to operate as smoothly as possible for the benefit of high ranking state officials and the rich. This is done through depriving workers of property, dominating them and exploiting them. It seems highly unlikely, therefore, that having Mine-Line nationalised by the state would have any benefit; on the contrary it would probably lead to the further domination and exploitation of the workers involved. As such, if anything is to be won from the state it has to be won through struggle, and through weakening the state and not strengthening it by having it take over ownership.

The point, therefore, is that even if the South African state was to nationalise Mine-Line – due to its neo-liberal character this in itself is highly unlikely – the consequences of such a step for the prospect of real worker self-management within that factory would be devastating. The fact that the state would have ownership over the factory would increase its power over the workers involved. If a conflict between the interests of the state and those of the workers arose, as would inevitably happen, the fact that the state owned Mine-Line would enable it to more easily suppress the demands of the workers involved – as its power as owner and would be immense. It, therefore, is tactically suicidal to have the state take ownership of a factory that workers recently gained control over through struggle. Doing so would further undermine the workers' power, place them undoubtedly in a position of subordination to a higher authority, and hamper the possibility of class independence. Far from strengthening the workers position; it would weaken it!

Even without having the state nationalise Mine-Line, the damage that the state can do, in terms of undermining genuine workers' control, is already evident. In seeking to legally register

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<sup>13</sup> Kropotkin, P. 1897. *The State: Its Historic Role*. Freedom Press: United Kingdom

as a worker co-operative, and sourcing funding from the DTI, pressure from the state for Mine-Line to run on a purely capitalist basis is clearly apparent. The Mine-Line workers have been forced by the state into a process of proving, via financial statements, that the cooperative will be viable in capitalist terms. The state believes that co-operatives need to be competitive and contribute towards economic development – as such it is not concerned with the workers’ or democratic control. Should Mine-Line workers receive funding from the state, they would also be required to provide reports on a regular basis. If the state is not satisfied with these reports or the progress of the company (as defined by the state itself) it can at any stage withdraw funding<sup>14</sup>. Thus, embarking on the path of registering Mine-Line as a co-operative has already meant that the workers’ control of the direction of the factory is, in reality, being undermined. Having the state nationalise a factory such as Mine-Line would only make this situation worse – it would hand the state even greater power over the workers. Considering that all states (even supposed workers’ states) and genuine workers’ control and democracy have proven to be irreconcilable, the consequences of such a move would, in all probability, be catastrophic.

In fact, there are ample examples from history that demonstrate that the interests of workers’ self-management and state-ownership, including ownership under a so-called workers’ state, are incompatible. States have shown to have almost no interest in allowing workers to run their own affairs or to allow democracy in the workplace. The Soviet Union was a prime example of this. It was the Soviet state, under the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, which crushed worker self-management. This happened shortly after the October revolution when the interests of the working class began to openly clash with those of the elite within the Bolshevik Party. As such, it was in 1918 that Lenin ended worker self-management within Russia through decreeing the implementation of one-man management<sup>15</sup>. This saw the Soviet state appoint these new managers, often from the ranks of the old elite, and forcefully end any of democracy in the workplace – often at the point of a gun. The fact that the Soviet state had nationalised most of the factories, which had originally been seized by workers from the capitalist class, contributed to this – it gave the Soviet state immense power which it then wielded against the workers. In fact, the Soviet state accepted no independent initiative from workers in factories and state rule proved itself incompatible with workers self-management and direct democracy<sup>16</sup>. As workers were not, and could never be the state (due to its oppressive and hierarchical nature it was designed for a minority to rule over a majority), state ownership never translated into the socialisation of property and wealth, it never led to an end to capitalism, and it smothered workers’ control. As such, nationalisation also never broke the relations of production that defined capitalism; it rather re-instituted it and entrenched it. Therefore, the very logic of all states has proven to be centralist, authoritarian and elitist. This means states are incompatible with genuine grassroots democracy, self-management and participation. If workers’ control was crushed by the state in a period of revolution in Russia – using its ownership of enterprises as one weapon – why would it be any different in South Africa? As such, nationalisation under workers’ control has proved to be a historical oxymoron: a tactical and ideological dead end that undermines true workers’ control and self-management.

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<sup>14</sup> Philip, T. K. 2006. *Enterprise Development on the Margins: Making Markets Work for the Poor*. Wits PHD Thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, T. 1995. *Lenin and Workers’ Control*. AK Press: United States

<sup>16</sup> Brinton, M. 1970. *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control*. Black Rose Books: Canada

## **Rather raise the slogan of collectivization or socialisation**

A far better strategy, than calling for nationalisation under workers' control, could be to try to use the example of the workers' direct actions at Mine-Line to begin to rebuild a sense of class independence, class pride and worker self-management more generally amongst the working class. Self-management and class pride are going to be vital in any broader struggle for genuine freedom. Mine-Line has the real potential to be a living example of class independence, class pride and self-management. In the hands of workers themselves it could become highly inspirational – as other occupations from places like Argentina have proven to be. It is these elements – of class pride, class independence and self-management – that need to be nurtured and fostered at Mine-Line. It is this that could be used to win concessions from the state, as would have to be done, from an independent class basis. Calling for nationalisation or even following a legal route does not do this. It rather fuzzes the fact that the state, along with the ex-owner, is an enemy of the workers. As such, the call for nationalisation has the potential to generate false hopes in the state and foster subordination to higher power, which could weaken independent action by workers.

Importantly, examples like Mine-Line could show that worker self-management in the workplace in South Africa is quite feasible and desirable as a means of working class fight back for social justice and liberation. It also has the real potential to act as an example for other workers to follow and adapt in the factories that are being shut during the crisis. Mine-Line, however, cannot – as has been pointed out – survive in a sea of capitalism by its own. Therefore, we should perhaps be using Mine-Line as an example to begin to try and build a campaign to generalise occupations and worker self-management; rather than seeing it as an isolated event or a path to legal co-operatives. If this could be done, through workers literally taking over factories, workers themselves would be beginning to take the first steps towards socialising property and wealth. From recent events in South Africa such an idea may not be that far fetched. Already, within the last 18 months there have been numerous occupations by workers in the mining industry, which were sadly crushed by the state due to their isolation<sup>17</sup>. There was also an occupation of a textile factory in the Eastern Cape last year by workers<sup>18</sup>, along with an occupation by NUMSA members of a recycling plant in Gauteng. Although the workers involved in these occupations were not staging them with the aim of embarking on self-management, with a potential example such as Mine-Line, this could have been different. It is highly likely, therefore, that other occupations are going to occur – but it's a matter of ensuring that they are not isolated. Of course, such a struggle will not be easy; but it could be a path for workers to regain their dignity, which bosses and the state are attacking, and it could be a launching pad for the struggle for true freedom.

If more factories are taken over by workers, links based on solidarity could also be fostered between them. For example, in Argentina worker self-managed factories have taken tentative steps towards linking up with one another in a bid to create a more sheltered 'market' for their goods, and thus some have attempted to become suppliers and customers of one another. Some have also created links to communities, which have been vital in their defense against the pres-

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<sup>17</sup> Hattingh, S. 2010. Mineworkers' direct action: occupations and sit-ins in South Africa. *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society* Vol. 13, Issue 3 pp. 343–350.

<sup>18</sup> [www.dispatch.co.za](http://www.dispatch.co.za) 9<sup>th</sup> April 2010



asures of the market and attacks from the state<sup>19</sup>. If workers seize more factories in South Africa, such relations and experiments could be embarked upon to try to create some sort of buffer for these entities against some of the worst aspects of capitalist competition and the threat of the state. This, however, would still only be a stop gap measure – ultimately capitalism and the state need to be broken through revolutionary class struggle if genuine worker self-management is to become a widespread reality.

To ensure that future occupations are not isolated, however, will also require revolutionary unions, controlled by members themselves through direct democracy, which strive to expropriate the wealth of the exploiting classes, end the ruling classes' power, and create a society that is genuinely free. Without such unions, broadening factory occupations is going to be very difficult. Already the experience of South Africa demonstrates this. It has not only been Mine-Line where union bureaucrats have been a barrier. When occupations recently occurred in the mining sector in South Africa, most union officials were weary of these actions and, worse still, often tried to sabotage them<sup>20</sup>. They were partly able to do this because real power within these unions rested with these officials; not the members. Thus, if workers are going to emancipate themselves they are not only going to have to struggle against bosses and politicians, but also against union bureaucracies. However, if unions can be transformed into revolutionary movements once more, resources – currently controlled by officials – could be loosened up. In the context of South Africa, the largest unions have substantial investment arms, which are currently using members' money to speculate on stock markets<sup>21</sup>. Should workers succeed at transforming their unions into radical movements, these investment arms could be shut and the resources that have been following into them (like a large portion of members' dues) could be used for vastly different purposes, like defending the working class including defending occupied factories. As such, unions should cease the practice of forming investment arms; and instead focus on using union's resources to fight against capitalists and the state. Using such resources to bolster factory occupations, would also mean that workers occupying a factory would not be under an immense pressure to turn to the state for funding, and they would not have to simply accept the conditions that states place on such funding. It would, therefore, provide a much greater space for independent action.

Indeed, if factory or workplace occupations could become more generalised, and if the workers could hold onto these workplaces and begin to democratically run them, this could also be used as one element to build a sense of counter-power and a counter culture that could in the future fundamentally challenge capitalism and the state. True freedom will only exist once the state and capitalism (or any market system) have gone – it is only then that all oppression can be ended, imbalances of power eradicated, and the relations of production that exist in the current society ended. Only in a society based on economic planning from below through councils and assemblies, distribution by need, self-governance based on federated councils using direct democracy and worker self-management will freedom exist – which, by its very nature, is incompatible with state control and indeed the very notion of a state.

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<sup>19</sup> Trigona, M. 2006. Recuperated factories in Argentina. [www.zcommunications.org/recuperated-enterprises-in-argentina-by-marie-trigona](http://www.zcommunications.org/recuperated-enterprises-in-argentina-by-marie-trigona)

<sup>20</sup> Hattingh, S. 2010. Mineworkers' direct action: occupations and sit-ins in South Africa. *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society* Vol. 13, Issue 3 pp. 343–350.

<sup>21</sup> Iheduru, O. 2001. Organised labour, globalization, and economic reform: union investment companies in South Africa. *Transformation* Vol. 46 pp. 1–29.

Mine-Line, and hopefully other future occupations and examples of self management, could act as training grounds – along with self-managed revolutionary movements – for such a future self-managed society. They could be places that generate and nurture practices of direct democracy, class independence and class pride – ingredients that will be necessary for any genuine revolution. In fact, it is high time that workers begin taking back the wealth they have produced from the bosses and politicians, and to do this factory occupations and embarking on worker self-management are some of the main keys. As part of this, workers need to also begin giving the middle finger back to the state; and not go on hands and knees begging for it to take ownership of what is actually rightfully theirs. In other words they need to begin building the elements of a future revolution now so they themselves will know how to run a future anarchist-communist society, without any reliance on some higher power like a state or ‘revolutionary’ elite.

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