

Sibanye strike backfires on Amcu

Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu) members at Sibanye-Stillwater's gold operations have walked away from a five-month strike no better off than their colleagues from other unions.



Driefontein operation. Image: Sibanye-Stillwater

Amcu called 14,000 of its members, representing about half of Sibanye's gold workforce, out on a wage strike on November 21, just days after a wage agreement signed by National Union of Mineworkers (the NUM), Solidarity and UASA.

Now, almost five months later, Amcu has signed the same 2018 three-year wage agreement previously signed by the other three unions. The terms are R700 increase in year one, the same in year two and an R825 increase in year three. The other concession is a R4,000 cash payment to striking members, and a soft R5,000 loan to be repaid over 12 months, which considering how much workers have lost in wages over the strike period is a mere token.

But the strike has a murky underbelly. It was Amcu's push to assert its position as a big-league player in the labour force. A move that has backfired, and put Amcu on the back foot as the platinum sector's wage negotiation window opens.

At a joint press conference, Amcu President Joseph Mathunjwa said there was no political pressure for the union to sign an agreement with Sibanye. "The decision was solely based on the plight of and mandate from our members whom we serve."

Despite holding the hard line, Sibanye didn't get off lightly. Production dropped significantly, and estimated losses hovered around the R1.5bn. "We are pleased that the extended strike at our gold operations has ended, without undermining other stakeholders or compromising their rights," said Neal Froneman, CEO of Sibanye-Stillwater.

There was also a human cost. Nine people have been killed and more than 60 houses of NUM supporters were burnt down in areas around Carletonville where Sibanye has two of its three gold mines.