

Knut Henkel, Interview with Bishop Jo Seoka for the newspaper „Neues Deutschland“, 29/04/2015

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BASF has to undertake responsibility

An Interview with Johannes Seoka, Anglican Bishop of Pretoria about the dealing with the massacre in Marikana

Johannes Seoka was (and still is) chosen from the workers of the platinum mine in Marikana to be their representative towards the owner of the mine, the Britain based enterprise Lonmin. Seoka, born 1948, is chairperson of the “Bench Marks Foundation”, a faith-based organization owned by the churches in South Africa; the foundation is closely monitoring the mining sector in South Africa. Seoka will give a speech on the 30 April at the BASF shareholder meeting.

Bishop Seoka, you will participate at the BASF shareholder meeting in Mannheim. Why you travelled so many miles from Pretoria to do it?

My intention at this meeting is to raise awareness about the consequences of the shareholders expenses for the people in South Africa. I would like to inform the shareholders how their money is influencing the relationships between people in South Africa and how they influence – directly and indirectly – the mining sector.

You are chairperson of the “Bench Marks Foundation”, a church based development organization, which is investigating (and fighting for) “corporate social responsibility” (CSR). Is there a study of this foundation about the Marikana massacre, 16 August 2012, where thirty-four workers were killed by the police?

No, we didn’t make a survey about the Marikana massacre, but we did make a survey before the massacre; we warned with this study that the situation is explosive. We conducted several interviews and had the impression that there could be to severe conflicts in the near future. We warned with our reports; these reports were of course also accessible for the mining company Lonmin. But I have the impression that the management ignored the warnings.

You were elected to be one mediator in the conflict with the enterprise. What did you experienced?

The workers would have liked to negotiate their demands directly with the management, but it denied to do so, the management refused the demands. This enhanced the conflict. If the management would have been willing to negotiate, than the massacre would have been probably never happen. 34 people were killed at this massacre. Most people were killed by shots in the back.

Do you see the will and effort by the legal system, the South African government and by Britain based company Lonmin to shed light upon the massacre?

Now, a commission of inquiry was appointed, which issued on the 1st of April its final report; it is the decision of the government, if it will be publicly published. There should be several recommendations in this report, but I didn't receive the report, so I couldn't analyze it. There is no doubt that the civil society and the unions exert pressure that the report will be published – this is done in the interest of the victims and their relatives.

What is your assessment of the commission of inquiry and its work?

Well, I'm not too confident, because the commission is reporting directly to the president and the chairperson of the commission is the retired lawyer, Ian Gordon Farlam. Retired Lawyers are known that they are often loyal to their former employer. My opinion is that the hearings and the selection of witnesses was not representative – it is striking that for the workers themselves relatively very little time was conceded, the representative of the police and the state relatively a lot.

In your opinion, is a new independent inquiry necessary?

I would welcome that and I would like also to read and analyze the final report of the existent commission. Transparency is necessary, but exactly this is lacking. Of course, an independent and international commission of inquiry costs money, but it is in the interest of investors, because it is the precondition and the basis to settle the conflict.

How are the working conditions in the mines?

The conditions are disgraceful. This has a long history; it is connected with historically grown structures. Workers were brought from rural areas in the mines. These migrant workers live often in mass compounds, in informal settlements without any infrastructure. This has to be changed; they need a perspective for their families. The migrant labor system is also the reason, why the miners identify more with the regions where they come from, leaving their families and sending money home. As consequence, they do not have any job security.

Are there any differences between Lonmin and other mining companies – does it have better working conditions, is there a more responsible conduct?

Lonmin does pretend so. But the housing conditions are very bad, the infrastructure also; there are not enough schools, so the children have to go far to get educated.

How much is the average wage in the mines and how much is needed to supply a four-member family in South Africa?

The workers earn about 4000 Rand (about 308,- €), that's nothing, it's not enough. The workers say that 12.500 Rand would be an appropriate living wage, - that's about 1.000 US-Dollar. Lonmin promised to pay this sum, but they make no move to halt this engagement.

What were the main reasons for the conflict in August 2012?

The precarious working conditions, the workers wanted to negotiate with the management their wages. But Lonmin refused to talk with them and so the situation escalated. Lonmin takes every possibility to reinforce that they do everything to improve the situation. But we do see nothing in relation to it.

BASF is principal customer of Lonmin's platinum. Is it co-responsible?

Yes, that's what the shareholders need to understand. The person who invests has a co-responsibility for the local working- und living conditions – he/she cannot just think on profits. BASF is the main customer of Lonmin and has therefore an immense influence. Lonmin would listen to BASF (and take its advices for serious), I guess.

BASF is committed to its own code of conduct in order to meet high standards of human and labor rights. A contradiction?

The massacre of 16 August and the conduct of Lonmin in dealing with the workers and their wage demands is not consistent with BASFs code of conduct. But that is a crucial problem, because the one who commits itself to a code of conduct has the responsibility to implement it, to realize it – also its control instruments. We call upon BASF to undertake responsibility – for what happened in Marikana. The minimum would be a gesture of goodwill.