

More than 2 000 workers die from industrial accidents each year in SA. Millions more are injured in these accidents. And thousands more die from occupational diseases.

Health and Safety has not become such a major issue among unions in this country as it has in other countries. One reason for this is the level of development of our country.

The struggle for health and safety in the workplace cannot be separated from other struggles waged by workers. This means that health and safety should not be dealt with in isolation. The struggle for better wages is tied to the struggle for better compensation as many workers suffer injuries while at work.

**ORGANISING WEAPON**

Health and Safety is an organising weapon. This means that unions have the responsibility to take the initiative. Bosses regard safety as their business. They don't see workers taking part in making their workplaces safe. They end up putting profits before safety.

Unions need to address health and safety issues in a more conscious way. In September 1983 68 workers died in Hlobane due to a methane explosion. The NUM, which was still crawling at that stage, took up the matter and organised representation for the workers who were injured and the families of the deceased. NUM had no members on that mine, but its presence was vital as a number of wrongs were brought to the surface. This raised the consciousness of workers and many joined the union. This demonstrates how unions should not lose an opportunity to organise even in places where this has not been possible before.

**HEALTH EDUCATION**

For unions it is important that education around health and safety should be given high priority. Unless workers themselves take the initiative to make their workplaces safe, more and more workers will get killed and maimed at work.

In 1983, after the Hlobane disaster, only mineworkers staged a 1 hour stoppage. But in 1986 we saw stoppages ranging from 1 hour to a total stayaway of 600 000 workers both in mining and other industries. This clearly demonstrated to even the most conservative of employers that workers have the capability of striking over any issue that affect them in the workplace.

The only way to stop the above incidents from happening is to organise :

- \* workers need to have safety stewards whose tasks would be to look at health and safety only.
- \* workers need to have safety committees that will negotiate with management on all safety issues
- \* workers need to inspect the work place to detect hazards and make plans to correct this before workers are hurt. This should be done without loss of earnings.
- \* workers need to call a government inspector in the event of violations of the law.
- \* workers need to have access to all information and any research done by management.

# SAFETY



**DEATH IN DARK PASSAGE**

Second shaft went down the ground  
 Counted in thousands great number  
 Kissing a big bye to the bright sun  
 Wearing faces of brave hunting men  
 While death lay silently waiting  
 In the dark passage

Skins of men shimmering bright with sweat  
 Attacking wealth of hot stomach ground  
 Torches from hard-hats bright as yesterday  
 All silent as racing machines crushes  
 While death lay silently waiting  
 In the dark passage

Darkness become dark and skin touching  
 Thick smoke hunting men, grabbing zones  
 Torches went dim and life going out  
 Screams and crying emerging the top soil  
 As death lay chewing painful so many  
 In the dark passage

Burning of feet in heavy boots grumbles  
 As safety was chased in the darkest dark  
 Many falling and many crying aloud  
 Pushing and wrestling between death and life  
 As death lay chewing painful so many  
 In the dark passage

NUM stood up crying with despair  
 Awaiting the warm hands of Mother-COSATU  
 To cuddle the baby so cold bleeding  
 While big stomach bosses count their gold bags  
 As death lay chewing painful so many  
 In the dark passage

POGISO JOHN SEITSHIRO (NAAWU)



# FIRST

**BOSSSES LAWS**

Like all other laws in this country, laws on safety issues are meant to protect bosses' profits and entrench white superiority. There are no laws in this country to defend workers and their rights. Factories are governed by the Machinery and Occupational Safety Act (MOSA) while the mines are governed by the Mines and Works Act. These laws deal with issue of health and safety

at work, but they do not give many rights to workers. An example is regulation 8.3.2 of the Mines and Works Act which states that workers who believe their work place is unsafe have a right to leave that area and only return when it is safe. Because white workers wield supervisory power over black

workers, black workers are not protected from dismissal if they refuse to work in an area they consider dangerous. The Machinery and Occupational Safety Act makes provision for workers to have safety committees but states that management should nominate these. Also management is empowered to nominate safety representatives from among the

workers. In other countries this is left to the workers.

**WORKER WEAPONS**

The important thing for workers is to take these loopholes in the law and actually make them into sharp weapons to fight the bosses.

It is important that workers should learn lessons from each other and be able to move forward. This needs workers from different unions to meet and discuss issues of health and safety together. It is only through such interaction that COSATU will be effective in mobilising for health and safety under workers control.

**600 000 STRIKE**

Over 600,000 workers took action on October 1st in protest against the wasted lives of the 182 mine workers who died in the Kinross mine disaster. Of these, 325,000 were mine workers who came out on a national strike. This was the biggest national action ever organised by a union.

This great protest action shows just how seriously workers feel about health and safety. And it shows what our slogan "AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL" really means.

At the memorial service organised by NUM for our dead comrades Comrade Koti - a miner who survived - described his experience : " I don't know exactly what happened. I was on the upper level.

All of a sudden there was this smoke. As it got close to workers, so they started fainting. I ran from that place. People were fainting about me. I jumped over a machine operator I knew who was out on the ground.

The team leader made all attempts to help those who were fainting. But the white mine supervisor only asked about how many boers were involved. He did not ask about black workers.

The machine operator who I jumped over when I tried to run away is late now. Many of my comrades are late. It was the worst experience I can imagine. Even today I don't how I also escaped. I am lucky."

Cde Winnie Mandela also spoke at the meeting. She bought greetings from the ANC exile and Robben Island leadership. She said : " We are accepting the challenge of the

Pretoria regime. Today miners must realise that it is the gold that we dig underground that buys the hippos and guns of the enemy. The day is coming when you will be asked to refuse to dig gold for them. The golden key to liberation is in your hands. The workers are the spearhead of the liberation struggle. Mayihlome."

Cde Cyril Ramaphosa, General Secretary of NUM, said that health and safety must be under the control of the workers. This will stop unnecessary accidents because bosses are only worried about their profits and not about workers lives. " Only when the mines themselves are run and controlled by workers will we have safe and healthy working conditions."