

Mine Struggles in the Carletonville Region

It is 4.50 pm, Wednesday June 26. The meeting to report back on current wage negotiations to workers of hostel No 9 at Western Deep Levels Gold Mine is about to start. Slowly workers - some still wearing their work clothes, others wrapped in blankets - stream into the arena, over 5,000 in all. The sun is beginning to set, ending another day of labour.



James Motlatsi, president of the NUM and Tshepo Motaung, branch chairman move to the centre of the arena to start the meeting. Speaking through megaphones, they request everyone to stand and sing "Nkosi Sikelele Afrika" which ends with a repertoire of "Amandla Awethu" chants. Motlatsi speaks in Sotho and Motaung translates into Xhosa:

As I told you last week we had a meeting with the Chamber and put forward your proposals. After a long meeting we could not reach agreement. We changed our proposal in terms of the mandate but the Chamber has still not accepted it.

He reads and the Chamber's offer whilst workers intermittently shout their disapproval. "That is the Chamber's final offer. I want to ask you, do you accept their offer?" Before he can finish, workers shout in unison in a deafening chant, "...Asiyfune! Asiyfune! Asiyfune!" (Go away with that offer we don't want it!)

"Ok! Ok! comrades. We know Western Deep Levels can pay more and our proposals were reasonable. We only want a living wages, and better health and safety conditions." "Amandla! Amandla!", shout the workers in approval. They listen attentively. Questions are asked about the implications if they refuse the Chamber's offer. Molatesi explains the problems of last year's legal strike where alot of police violence was employed. He explains that a central committee meeting will be held later that evening and that all the shaft stewards from all the NUM regions will bring their reports so that a proposal can be formulated for the conciliation board meeting with the Chamber. He encourages workers

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to consolidate their organisation and maintain maximum unity. He emphasises that they convey the decision of the meeting to those who were not present. He stresses that discipline is vital and that workers should listen to the shaft stewards when they report back after the conciliation board meeting. The meeting ends with 'Nkosi Sikelele Afrika.'

There have been a number of strikes in the Carletonville region. In 1982 East and West Driefontein were involved in the strike wave over wages. In September 1983 West Driefontein took strike action over unsafe working conditions. In February this year in East Driefontein 11,300 miners struck over the induna system and the question of shaftsteward representation. At East Driefontein the shaft steward leadership was arrested and are still awaiting trial, their case having being postponed on a number of occasions.

Over the last 5 months there have been widespread boycotts of concession stores and liquor outlets leading to major gains by mine workers. At Western Deep Levels, the boycotts have resulted in the first negotiated agreement between the NUM shaftsteward committee and local shopkeepers (see below). Workers' grievances include the fact that prices of goods were constantly changing; they were taxed on items which were exempted; rotten food was sold; they were subject to body searches and abuse by the shopowners. Negotiations are still in progress concerning the bars and liquor outlets which workers wish to transform from profit making enterprises into a recreational facility under workers' control.

The SALB spoke to James Motlatsi, president of the National Union of Mineworkers about some of the struggles in the region. Born in Lesotho in 1951, he has been employed for over 15 years in the mining industry. After working as a rock face worker, driller and team leader, he is today a personnel assistant at Western Deep Levels. He has considerable knowledge of the industry and the problems confronting the workers. He has been active in the NUM since its inception and was elected the first president of the union. He spoke about the early organisation and the achievements in the Carletonville region.

Western Deep Levels Gold Mine came into operation in 1962 at a capital cost of R60 million. The mine straddles the Gatsrand or "Ridge of holes", some 70 kilometres west of Johannesburg, on what is termed the West Wits Line, the geographical name for the extension of the Witwatersrand reefs. The mines area extends for 10.8 km from east to west and for 4 km from north to south. Two identical shafts systems, 2.5 km apart, known as No 2 and No 3 shafts are operated. In 22 years of production 1,034,793 kilograms of gold has been mined, representing a total revenue of R4,864 million.

SALB: How was the NUM launched?

Motlatsi: When CUSA passed a resolution we saw this in the newspaper. I met Cyril Ramaphosa by chance and we briefly spoke about the union and then made an appointment to visit Western Deep Levels. We started recruiting members before we even had access to the mine. It was not very easy because management was very harsh; threatened workers; refused to give meeting facilities and were reluctant to allow union organisers to represent members. But because of the workers' determination we soon grew from strength to strength. At present we have a branch committee of 11 members and 102 shopstewards for the 2 shafts.

In launching the NUM the process was to get committees of workers organising at various mines. From these committees we got together 60 people from 8 mines into a planning committee where the draft constitution was examined and amendments made. We then mobilised and made arrangements for our launch at Jouberton in Klerksdorp where over 2,000 attended. At this meeting I was elected president. This was in 1982.

SALB: What are the structures of the union?

Motlatsi: The first level of the organisation is the shaft steward council which represents all the different categories of workers. Next we have a shaft stewards committee which is elected by the shaft stewards council. The shaft stewards committee is also the branch committee where there is only one shaft on the mine. Each mine is usually a branch although at some very big complexes where there are different divisions to a mine, the division comprises a branch (as at Vaal Reefs). We then have a regional committee comprising branch represen-

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tatives. The regional committee then sends representatives to the central committee which is an important decision-making body. Our national executive committee is made up of the regional chairman, president and vice-president, treasurer and general secretary who is the only paid official on that body. Our highest body is the National Congress made up of delegates from the regions and which meets every year and where policy matters are discussed and elections are held.

Each level of organisational leadership handles specific problems. If, for example, a branch shaft steward cannot handle a problem the regional shaft stewards then assist before we even call in an organiser. Many of our regions handle virtually all their domestic problems and negotiations. Our head office does not have to do much at that level except when management refuses to negotiate locally.

SALB: Getting back to the region, how strong is the union at Western Deep Levels? Is there a recognition agreement?

Motlatsi: We represent more than 50% of the workers across the board. We have well over 10,000 members and have recognition agreements for both surface and underground workers. Together with Elandsrand Gold Mine we are the only mines which have recognition for both categories of workers. We are in the process of negotiating a shaft stewards recognition agreement. We envisage to have in the region of 200 shaft stewards to represent all categories of workers.

SALB: When did the boycotts start at Western Deep Levels?

Motlatsi: On April 20, the workers held a meeting at Western Deep Levels No 2 Arena where we discussed the conditions of the shops and liquor outlets. A decision was taken by about 9,000 workers to boycott the stores. This was one of the biggest meetings and participation was great on the pros and cons of the boycotts. Our reasons for the shop boycotts were the same as all the other boycotts taking place at mines.

On the liquor question we attached a few workplace demands because the bars are owned by management. They were demands for toe cap boots for safety, recognition of safety stewards and that management should cover the costs for overalls and jackets for black miners as well as whites. We immediately

implemented the boycotts on 21 April and everybody adhered to the call even if they were non-union members.

The mass meeting served as a forum to discuss the issues and everybody felt that they were not fairly treated. A boycott stewards committee of 35 workers was elected from hostels Nos 2, 3 and 9. This committee was responsible to the general membership, to monitor the boycott and enter negotiations.

SALB: What was the shopkeepers response?

Motlatsi: They were obviously worried. The shops on and near the mines depend on the mineworkers support. They immediately started looking for the people behind the boycott. They telephoned our head office for help. But they were told that the head office had nothing to do with the campaign. When they telephoned me I referred them to the branch chairman and the boycott stewards committee if they wished to negotiate.

SALB: Were there any attempts to break the boycotts by force?

Motlatsi: Well not at the stores. But the success of the boycott of liquor outlet proved a big headache for management. There were police road blocks over the 28 - 30 May. The three entrances to the Western Deep Levels hostels were sealed off and workers' liquor was confiscated. The objective of this was to force workers over the long weekend to buy at the bars, but this failed miserably. The use of force has not succeeded in breaking the boycott. Instead it has made workers more determined to have their demands met.

SALB: Could you estimate the losses of the shops and bars?

Motlatsi: That is really difficult - but it is alot of money. Because of worker pressure and the losses experienced by the shopowners, we were able to force them to concede some demands. But we also insisted that it be formalised in an agreement between the union and the shopowners which recognises our rights as customers. This is a major victory.

SALB: Are there any safeguards to ensure the implementation?

Motlatsi: Yes, firstly if things do not go as the workers want, then we will boycott again. Secondly, there will be

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close monitoring of the situation and thirdly, the workers have made sure that there is no bribery of the boycott stewards. The members of the boycott committee are not allowed to enter any of the shops except for negotiations. They have many eager workers prepared to do their shopping for them. If they have to see any of the items, they will be accompanied by other workers. This is to ensure workers' control and that nobody gets bought over.

SALB: Have the demands on the liquor outlets been met?

Motlatsi: Yes, in principle, but we have not yet opened the bars. Those demands for boots and overalls have been agreed to. The prices of liquor still have to be negotiated. The problem is that management buys liquor in thousands of rands and we are still getting our shaft stewards equipped to deal with the situation, before we open the bars. The workers do not want profits to be made on the liquor. Only the operating costs should be covered. The bars should be brought under the control of the workers.

SALB: What are the lessons of the boycotts?

Motlatsi: It has certainly raised workers' consciousness and assisted in the consolidation of our organisation. It has also shown how different tactics can be used to develop the workers' struggle and secure gains. The gains are important but they are really only the beginnings of our struggle. They have, nevertheless, shown what strong organisation, discipline and unity can achieve when workers struggles are democratically controlled.

Another important struggle in the Carletonville region was the strike on 17 and 18 May of over 10,000 mineworkers at Blyvooruitzicht Gold Mine in solidarity with two dismissed shaft stewards. The spontaneous strike or, more correctly, stay-aways from work, was the culmination of protracted struggles between management and workers over shaft steward rights.

In addition concession store owners, in anticipation of boycotts, requested the Blyvooruitzicht shaft stewards committee to nominate four representatives to discuss on a monthly basis

the grievances of mineworkers concerning conditions and services at the shops. A liquor boycott was launched but then called off to assess the situation.

Blyvooruitzicht Gold Mine, is owned by Rand Mines, and conducts gold mining operation on the far west Witwatersrand. Uranium oxide, silver and osmiridium are recovered as by products of the gold extraction process. Its total working profit amounted to R50,228 million during 1984, down about R17 million on the previous year as a result of the lower gold production, the increase in working expenditure and the price of gold. There are 2 shafts, 3 hostels and a married quarters (housing only 47 miners) on the mine. To date, recognition has only been obtained for groups 3 to 8 of the employees although negotiations for other categories are taking place.

The stay-away from work is one of the tactics used by mine workers to exercise pressure on management. Together with demonstrative stoppages, lengthier strikes, boycotts, work to rule, working half shifts, the stay-away on the mines has become another feature of working class action. The hostel conditions make stay-aways easy to implement although police action cannot be discounted. The stay-away tactic which has re-emerged as a specific form of class mobilisation in urban and rural centres throughout South Africa has now made its way onto the mines, although implementation remains selective.

Active in these struggles was Elijah Barayi, the 53 year old vice-president of the NUM. A personnel assistant at Blyvooruitzicht, Barayi is a seasoned activist with 25 years experience on the mines. Originally from Cradock in the Eastern Cape, Mr Barayi resides with his family in Ekuphakemmi Village, the married quarters at Blyvooruitzicht. He spoke to SALB about some of the issues:

SALB: What were the issues which preceeded the strike?

Barayi: One issue which has caused alot of dissatisfaction has been management's refusal to recognise certain categories of workers where we have overwhelming support. Everytime we send our figures for verification they come back and say we don't have adequate representation. Other grievances include production bonuses; the issuing of free overalls to workers;

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recognition of shaft stewards; opening of union offices; the prices of liquor at the bars; the victimisation of workers underground and dissatisfaction over charging up.

SALB: Did management attend to any of the grievances?

Barayi: No, not initially. The demands we submitted to management were not really taken seriously. To test the general feeling of workers for action, we held a mass meeting in early April. At this meeting, one of the biggest ever held in Blyvooruitzicht, workers emphasised that management was not treating them fairly. For example, liquor went up 3 times a year, while they only received one increase a year. We also discussed the situation of the shops but this was resolved when the owners negotiated with the shaft stewards.

SALB: What caused the mass action on May 17 and 18, and how would you characterise it?

Barayi: I was called in to represent 2 shaft stewards in a disciplinary hearing. While we were discussing the matter with the management, the workers decided not to go to work. Instead they gathered at No 3 hostel singing freedom songs until late on the morning of the May 18. Management then called in the police and mine security to disperse the workers. They used teargas. Workers challenged the police and wanted to know why they were doing this. We were told that management was behind this. The police left after shaft stewards contested their presence. Although our action can be termed a strike it is better seen as a stay-away from work.

SALB: What do you see as the major difference?

Barayi: Well, although our residence is on the mine, our action was centrally located at the hostels and not the shaft. Strike action, I would say, is action on the work-floor. They both have the same effect in that production does not continue, but the location of the action differs.

SALB: What happened on the May 18? How did management resolve the dispute?

Barayi: We had a mass meeting of over 9,000 on the soccer field where we discussed the issues. Workers wanted our

action to continue but we heard then that our head office was to take up the matter of the shaft stewards. It was then decided to go back to work on the Monday.

SALB: Did the workers lose any pay?

Barayi: The majority did not lose any wages. Only a few did not receive. It is unclear why management did this. We are still fighting this discrepancy.

SALB: Were any of your demands met?

Barayi: Only our first demand of a production bonus was met. All the others we are still negotiating with management. The struggle ahead is difficult and it requires us to strengthen our organisation to win these demands. It is only a matter of time.

Postscript:

The failure of the NUM and the Chamber of Mines to reach agreement on wage increases has already led to a spate of strikes and casualties. Over 27,000 miners at General Mining Union Corporation (Gencor) mines - Bracken, Leslie, Kinross and Winkelhaak in the Eastern Transvaal and Beatrix in the Orange Free State - struck in protest against the increase on July 1, the traditional implementation date of black miners' wage increases. One miner died and many were injured as police and mine security fired teargas, rubber bullets and birdshot. Mine property was destroyed, a concession store burnt and 560 workers sent back to the homelands.

In another strike at Lonhro's Western Platinum mine in Bophuthatswana, 3 miners were killed. Police and mine security violence has become a hallmark of the industry - a part of the extended industrial relations system.

Low wages in the industry has been a major grievance of workers. This year the NUM initially demanded 40% across the board monthly increase, but then reduced it's demand to 22%. The Chamber of Mine's final offer ranges between 14.1% and 19.6%.

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Although it is rumoured that Anglo American Corporation (AAC) would prefer to settle because they will be the most severely affected by strike action - of the 29 mines party to the dispute 18 are owned by Anglo - they are hamstrung by the other mine houses.

On Tuesday July 9, the NUM started their strike ballot at the 29 gold mines and collieries although this is not required by law as NUM is still unregistered at present. The ballots were surrounded by controversy. Rand Mines and Gold Fields were unco-operative and set impossible conditions for balloting, while Anglo Vaal's Hartebeesfontein's 18,000 miners were given only 24 hours to vote. Anglo American Corporation on the other hand complained of the wording on the ballot form.

But beyond these controversies, the key factor remains grassroots militancy. While there was an 11th hour attempt at settling during last year's legal strike, it did not avert widespread activity involving well over 70,000. If no fresh Chamber proposals are forthcoming a legal strike in the industry could affect over 200,000 miners - certainly the biggest industrial action in South African labour history.



DOCUMENT: Agreement Between Deep Levels Supply Store and NUM 3 Shaft Branch

The two parties agree that:

1. The cafeteria manager and staff will treat customers fairly.
2. New prices will be discussed by both parties.
3. Every customer will receive a cash slip showing the number of articles bought and price of each, the sub-total, the money handed to the cashier and the change the customer must get.
4. The manager has undertaken to see to it that all food sold is acceptably fresh and well cooked.
5. A price-tagging machine is to be purchased bearing the name of the shop. The price so marked will be the price the customer pays.
6. The "DO NOT READ BOOKS" sign has already been removed.
7. If a Gaming Machine is out of order, a notice will be displayed against such a machine.
8. No articles will be given as change to customers.
9. Customers can return articles they are not satisfied with for refund.
10. Opening and closing times will be negotiated by the two parties.
11. NUM must be informed of any disciplinary action taken against either employees of the shop or customers who misbehave.
12. No action will be taken against the shop unless such action has been discussed at higher authorities of both parties.

(12.6.85)