

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

**JB
Marks**

The giant who led the first miners' strike

TWO years ago an old lady from Eldorado Park near Johannesburg stood in the snow and ice covering the ground at Heroes' Acre in Moscow.

The woman was Mrs Gladys Marks, and she had come to see the grave of a man she had not seen for 20 years -- her husband, JB Marks, the man who had led the African Mine Workers' Union (AMWU) during the strike of 1946.

A few weeks ago, NUM visited Mrs Marks in Eldorado Park and she told us about JB and his life of struggle against apartheid.

JB was born in Ventersdorp in the Western Transvaal in 1903. His father was a worker on the railways and his mother was a nursing sister.

He studied to be a teacher at Kilnerton Training College -- and it was there that he organised his first strike. The food was bad at the school and students were treated very badly, so JB and his friends told the students not to go to classes until things got better.

Things never did get better -- but JB had his first taste of the struggle.

Soon after he finished studying, JB joined the Communist Party. At the time -- 1927 -- the Party was not banned.

He also got a job as a teacher at Vrededorft in the Orange Free State, where he taught the children of black miners.

That's where he first got to know miners' problems -- and also met the woman who became his wife.

Soon after they got married, JB left home. The

Communist Party sent him to study at the Lenin School in Moscow with other leaders like Albert Nzula and Moses Kotane.

But JB came back some time later -- and joined the ANC.

In the late 1930s he was elected to a committee to help revive the ANC, which had become weak. He remained a member of the Communist Party and helped organise many of the unions that joined CNETU.

In 1941 the ANC decided to establish a union for mineworkers and Marks was elected president because of his determination to fight for workers' rights. He was also elected chairman of CNETU.

JB was arrested during the great strike of 1946 but released on bail. When the AMWU was crushed after the strike, he continued to work for the ANC and the Communist Party.

In 1950 he became a member of the CP Central Committee and President of the ANC's Transvaal branch.

He was banned in 1952 but continued to work for both organisations.

In 1963, soon after the ANC was banned, JB left the country with Joe Slovo.

His wife and family never saw him again. On August 1, 1973 -- after 10 years of hard work in exile -- he died from a disease he got while living in Tanzania.

And now he lies buried under the snow many thousands of miles from home, in a graveyard with many other people from all over the world who gave their lives to the fight for freedom.



FIVE BRAVE

ONE of the greatest struggles in South African mineworkers' long fight for a better life began one cold morning in August 40 years ago.

On that day -- August 12 1946 -- more than 60 000 mineworkers on the Reef began a week-long strike that was to shake the mining industry.

It wasn't the first strike on the gold mines. But it was one of the most important events in the miners' proud history of struggle in this country.

The stoppage was one of the biggest in South Africa until the workers' movement took off in the 1970's.

For the first time mineworkers used a trade union to organise their strike -- a union called the African Mineworkers' Union, led by a tall man called JB Marks.

And in the strike the AMWU fought for exactly the same things we in NUM demand today -- a living wage, a healthy workplace, more money for injured workers and an end to the system of migrant labour.

At the end of those five brave days at least 12 workers lay dead. Most of the strikers were driven back to work at gunpoint.

The workers won none of their demands. But they did leave an example of courage for us to follow -- and many lessons for us to study.

Today we in NUM are taking this struggle forward,

and one way to make sure we win is to learn well from their example.

To do this, we must first look at the conditions our fathers worked under in those years.

Lambalazi and less than two shillings a day

The 1940s were bad years for all the workers of South Africa. It was the time when the whole world was at war with Adolf Hitler, the German dictator.

Wages were low, food was scarce and the townships were overcrowded. In the countryside the land dried up, cattle died and crops refused to grow.

Things were especially bad for the mineworkers. Underground, in terrible conditions, they did the hardest work in the country.

Every day white miners beat the workers to make them work harder. Rockbursts and other accidents killed thousands of workers.

If a man died in an accident, the mine sent 50 pounds to his family -- enough to last a few months.

Coffins and rotten food

In the compounds, 40 men slept on top of each other in cement beds they called coffins.

Rotten food came from the mine kitchens. The lumps of black bread called mbunyana intlokoyekati were so small they left a hole in your stomach. Workers called their porridge lambalazi --

water that makes you hungry. In return for all this, workers were paid one shilling and eight pennies a day -- at a time when families needed ten shillings a day to live.

Sometimes these things seemed as hard as the rock that workers mined underground. But the miners knew that just as they could move rock to find gold, they could stand together and fight these things.

Boycotts, sit-ins and the AMWU

The mineworkers did not wait for a union to help them. They used many of their own weapons in their struggle against the mine owners.

On some mines, workers refused to eat food from the kitchens. They said: "We will boycott your kitchens until the food improves."

At other mines workers used the sit-in strike underground to protest at assaults and too much overtime.

You can see that our fathers were using the same weapons miners use in the struggle today.

There were many struggles like this during the war years. Often the strikes were crushed by the police -- but many times the workers won and got small changes that made life a bit better.

The union makes us strong

The problem was that