

THE KINROSS DISASTER

15 000 voices - all saying: Safety first



"SAFETY before profits" was the rallying cry at Secunda's Embalehle Stadium -- and it's a cry that's going to be carried kilometres underground by South African miners.

Thousands of them converged on the stadium to pay tribute to their fallen comrades, who died in the Kinross mine disaster on September 16.

Adorned in NUM stickers with the slogan "Safety First", they made clear how they feel about safety conditions on South Africa's mines.

Posters carried by fellow Kinross miners echoed the rallying cry. "Safety is our first priority" read one. Another said: "We want decent working conditions underground". Yet another said: "46 000 workers have died underground".

Speakers at the memorial didn't mince their words, either.

* NUM president Comrade James Motlatsi asked miners: "Are you prepared to continue filling graves with bodies?"

"Are you prepared to go underground to dig out the bullets they are going to shoot us with?"

Cde Motlatsi also said: "The mine bosses have shown a disregard for the lives of black miners. They have even refused to let some of our colleagues come here today to join us."

"But we will close the mines from Namaqualand to Messina on October 1 to show how we feel about mine safety."

* Cosatu general secretary Comrade Jay Naidoo said: "The mine bosses' profits have meant starvation wages

Fists and coffin held high, Cosatu and NUM members carry a coffin into the memorial service at Cosatu house for the Kinross dead.

The deadly foam

POLYURETHANE foam is so dangerous that when it burns it can literally kill a man twice in a few seconds.

Mineowners around the world have known this for 20 years. That's why polyurethane foam is banned in British and American mines.

South African mineowners also know this -- but that apparently doesn't stop them using the foam in their mines.

Burning polyurethane has been responsible for that it makes a gas called carbon monoxide, underground deaths on at least two earlier occasions -- at Buffelsfontein Gold Mine, a Gencor mine, in 1978 and at Vaal Reefs Gold Mine in 1983.

By all accounts the foam

which caught fire at Kinross and which led to 177 deaths was also polyurethane.

Dr Herbert Eisner, a world expert who has studied mine fires and explosions for more than 40 years, came to South Africa to help NUM investigate the fire at Kinross.

He said the main danger with polyurethane foam is

Eisner said 0,1% of carbon monoxide in the air can kill. And tests in England have shown that a fire in a mine that uses the foam can fill 7% of the air with the deadly gas -- enough to kill a man in one breath.

The foam also makes other deadly gases like hydrogen cyanide, which can also kill people -- but not as quickly as carbon monoxide.

That's why we say the foam kills twice -- once with carbon monoxide and again with hydrogen cyanide.

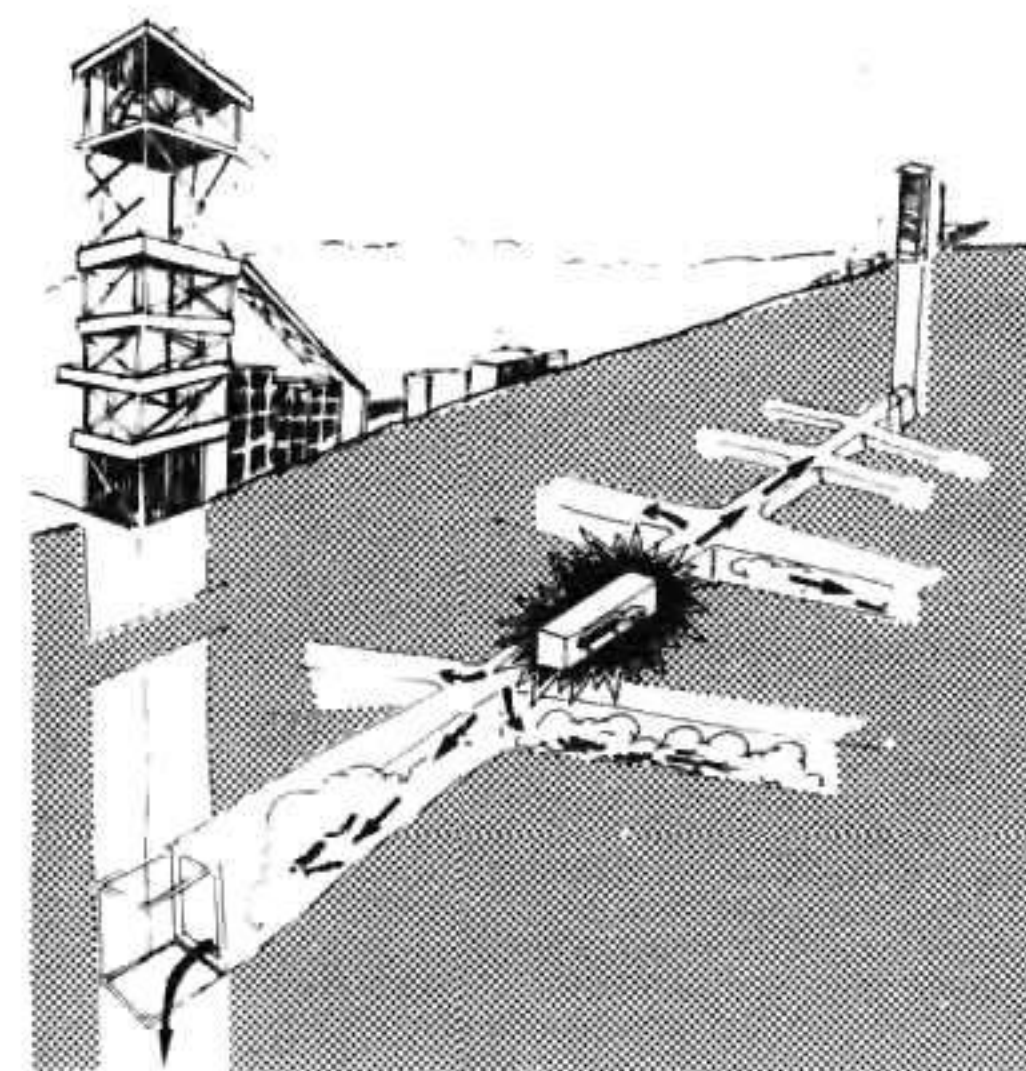
If the foam at Kinross was polyurethane, why did Gencor allow it?

After the fire, Gencor and the Chamber of Mines first said they did not know of the dangers of polyurethane.

Then the Chamber was told they could walk into the public library in Johannesburg and pick up a book that tells of the dangers of the foam.

Dr Eisner says the dangers of polyurethane are so well known that "a safety officer for a mine who does not know the hazards of the foam does not know his job."

The Chamber of Mines admitted it knew how



THE full story of what happened underground at Kinross will only be known when the inquiry is held.

In the meantime, many messages have been received from all over the world on the Kinross disaster. The Miners' International Federation and all its affiliates sent messages of support to the NUM and the

families of the deceased. Other organisations which sent messages include: The British National Union of Mineworkers; Swedish Confederation of Labour (LO) United Mine-workers of America; the Australian Prime Minister; the Swedish Prime Minister; and the Trade Union Congress of Britain (TUC).

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Posters told exactly how the miners felt about their fallen comrades.

The spirit was high among those who attended the memorial service at Secunda's Embalenhle Stadium.



The death trap: Kinross mine.

for the workers. "It is this greed which caused the deaths at Hlobane and Kinross."

* Comrade Winnie Mandela said: "Miners are making the money to let those men sit on those Casspirs outside. The gold and diamonds you dig pays those policemen -- it pays

for their uniforms and their guns." She said the people of Soweto and other townships would join the work stoppage on October 1.

The crowd loved what the speakers had to say. They danced, cheered and sang freedom songs throughout the memorial service, and carried NUM speakers

shoulder-high after they spoke.

They cheered, too, when the numerous messages of support were read from trade unions in Chile, Sweden, Britain, West Germany, the United States, Canada and several African countries.

Other messages came from the SA Congress of Trade Unions, (Sactu) the United Democratic Front and Cosatu.

There were also cheers for the comrades who were unable to make it to the memorial -- particularly those forced to go underground at Kinross on that day.

And there was anger towards mine management when NUM general secretary Cyril Ramaphosa announced that Kinross shifts had been forced to work at gunpoint.



NUM Secunda regional chairman Eric Vala was chaired around the stadium after the meeting.

that can kill a man in seconds

dangerous the foam was, but said it used chemicals on the foam to stop it burning so easily.

But Dr Eisner says these chemicals are useless. Tests in England show treated foam is just as dangerous as ordinary foam.

South African mineowners have sent people to international conferences where these tests have been spoken about. And many books and journals have written about how useless treated polyurethane is.

This raises important questions which will need to be answered at the inquiry into the Kinross disaster.

The use of the flame cutting equipment underground will also need to be examined.

When the visit occurred, NUM's delegation had to join a party of over sixty people who went underground. This party included people with little or no interest in the case, including representatives from AMAWU and UWUSA.

The vistor were shunted through the mine and not given a chance to inspect the area properly. All because our law does not give workers proper rights in regard to safety. Again this could never happen on mines in other parts of the world.

In Britain, mineowners are not allowed to run their mines after an accident. The government inspector takes over the mine while he does an investigation. During that time management can only go down the mine with the inspector. The union has the

same right. In South Africa this does not happen. It is easy for the mine bosses to cover up the truth about accidents.

One of the truths the mine bosses love to cover up is that SA mines are among the most dangerous in the world.

On the day of the Kinross fire, the the Chamber of Mines released figures which said South African mines were the safest in the world.

But Dr Eisner says this is simply not true. South African coal mines kill more than eight times the number of British miners underground. The gold mines are even bigger killers -- Kinross and our dead comrades are proof of this.

Another way the

mineowners pretend their mines are safe is by giving out stars to mines that have "good" safety measures.

Dr Eisner doesn't believe this is a good way to make mines safer.

He says the system encourages mine managements to hide the truth -- something they are already very good at. If they speak about accidents and dangers on their mines, then they might lose one or two of their stars.

Dr Eisner says we need a new system to make sure dangers on the mines are reported and the mines made safer.

We know this will only happen when workers and their shaftstewards have a full say in health and safety on the mines.

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