NUM defining events

The events that defined the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) included ethnic trouble at Vaal Reefs, the 1987 strike and the Welkom moment, writes **Dunbar Moodie**.

1986 ETHNIC TROUBLE AT VAAL REEFS

Ethnicity (tribalism) is commonly held to be a major issue in Africa. At least on the SA mines, as I have argued elsewhere, it usually overlapped with other divisions so that 'tribal consciousness' often expressed serious conflicts of interest between different groups of workers. Moreover, depending on the numbers of any group on a particular mine, 'tribes' often blended together or separated themselves out. At least on the mines, 'tribalism' was a fluid identity.

On Anglo mines in the 1970s and 1980s, however – especially in the Free State and in the Western Transvaal, 'tribal' conflicts tended to be between Basotho and Xhosa-speaking workers. Since citizens of Lesotho were forbidden by the apartheid state to engage in migrant work other than mining in South Africa, their accumulated experience meant they held more responsible jobs. (The same could be said for Mozambicans, of course, but they were seldom perceived as ethnic contenders – at least on Anglo mines – at this time.) What made Basotho workers especially conscious of their tribal status, besides their separate citizenship, was the existence of the MaRussia, a 'tribally' organised set of Sotho-based gangs, who dominated the taxi business and liquor dealing and provided sexually available women.

Basotho 'Russian' gangs have a long history, going back at least to the 1940s in SA townships on the Rand. As jobs for Basotho migrants began to be restricted to the mines in the 1960s, the 'Russians' moved into available areas and established informal settlements near to the mines, especially in the Free State and the Western Transvaal where there were many Basotho.

Russians both worked on the mines and lived off mine-workers. This meant that mine compound boundaries were relatively porous to gang members who moved back and forth. Rumour had it that some Basotho team leaders were also MaRussia. Since they were well paid, they certainly constituted good clients for Russian rackets.

As we have already seen, Basotho networks also made up some of the founding networks for the union. While the 'Russians' were openly 'tribal,' however, the NUM never was. During 1986 rumours abounded of management-funded attempts to provoke faction fights at Vaal Reefs. As I describe in *Going for Gold*, some of these factions were made up of members of 'tribal' dance groups, especially Mpondo, but when union members patrolling the mines captured workers supposedly smuggled in 'white Kombis' to provoke strife they were often Mosotho. Whether or not they were paid by lower-level managers or mine security personnel to make trouble for the union, they were probably MaRussia, many of whom continued to sleep in rooms on the mines even after they had been discharged.

At Vaal Reefs No 5 shaft, however, trouble for the union derived from Basotho team leaders (some of whom may have been Russians) who were in cahoots with Moramang, the Basotho induna. The union was very strong at No 5, due to the extraordinary organising capacities of Tyelovuyo Mgedezi, whose leadership made Vaal Reefs No 5 one of strongest NUM shafts in the country. After meetings union activists with Mgedezi at their head would toyi-toyi through the compound, irritating no end the Basotho induna and shaft stewards. The final straw, however, came when the NUM at Vaal Reefs embarked on a campaign to disrupt the recently established separate 'senior dining halls' where team leaders and black officials ate. Union members would seat themselves and demand to be served.

Team leaders started emerging from underground with crudely manufactured weapons. When one of them was caught, Mgedezi demanded that security do a sweep for weapons. The compound manager refused, arguing that workers were already drinking and a search would set off a riot. After several days of such shenanigans Mgedizi's cohorts staged their own

search, with much shouting and singing.

The evidence is murky, but it seems that a group of team leaders emerged armed from one of the rooms and four of them were beaten to death by the union group. Mgedezi, sensing trouble, had fled from the compound, but, next day, he was arrested and charged. No 5 shaft promptly went on strike demanding that the police release him.

Sokanyile and other union stalwarts, remembering the Lira mass dismissals, immediately called out the other shafts in East Division. No 4 on the West Division joined them. There were no mass dismissals (management had also learned a lesson from the Lira affair), but when the strike was finally resolved, Mgedezi remained in detention. Moramang, the Basotho induna, organised his forces and Xhosa-speaking workers at No 5, in fear of their lives, resigned en masse. On evidence cooked up by team leaders, Mgedezi was condemned to death and the Basotho (and perhaps the Russians) reigned supreme at Vaal Reefs No 5. In 1987, No 5 was the only shaft at Vaal Reefs not to go on strike.

I have written elsewhere of the massive faction fight at Vaal Reefs No 1 shaft which began with a hunt for NUM shaft stewards and a couple of union deaths before it degraded into Sotho/Xhosa combat. It should be noted, however, that even at this stage, many Basotho union stalwarts refused to join the mayhem. Not all Basotho were 'MaRussia' at the mines for 'business' whether criminal or otherwise. 'Tribal' issues, however, would often return to haunt union actions.

1987 STRIKE

In August 1987, over 300,000 mineworkers came out on strike, mostly on Anglo and Gencor mines. They stayed out for three weeks and returned to work only because of a series of rolling mass dismissals that were reducing union ranks. Goldfields and AngloVaal mines predictably repressed any hint of a stayaway from work. Given the number of workers involved and the length of the strike, what was most remarkable about it was the lack of violence. Only on those mines, especially Randfontein Estates and Vaal Reefs No 9, whose union organisation was characterised by Lira-like populism, was endemic violence used to enforce the strike.

On such mines, however, the workforce was seriously divided. Where solidarity reigned supreme workers simply stayed away. At two shafts, Vaal Reefs No 5 and Western Holdings No 6, work continued with only minor disruptions. At the former, now in Vaal Reefs West Division, it was the chief shaft steward, Charles Mapeshoane, who talked the union remnant out of violence before he was himself arrested and detained.

When Anglo threatened mass dismissals, they did so first at two of their most marginal shafts, Vaal Reefs No 6 and Western Holdings No 2. Union strategists seriously considered a selective return to work on those mines threatened with early mass dismissal. Indeed, at Western Holdings No 2, workers voted to go back and were talked out of it only by a last-minute intervention from Frans Baleni, (now NUM secretary general). Oliver Sokanyile told me regretfully that a similar strategy had been approved at Vaal Reefs, but the union head office had changed its mind at the last minute.

If the union could have pulled it off, he said, NUM structures on the mines would have remained intact and Anglo would have faced difficult days in court. (Mapeshoane was arrested and jailed because he suggested that returns to work be accompanied by systematic destruction of machinery underground, certainly a serious alternative to a drawn-out court case.) NUM head office apparently abandoned the strategy because it was felt that incremental returns to work would have threatened striker solidarity. As things turned out, massive rolling dismissals (dressed up as 'lockouts') meant that the union had to start again virtually from scratch on Anglo mines.

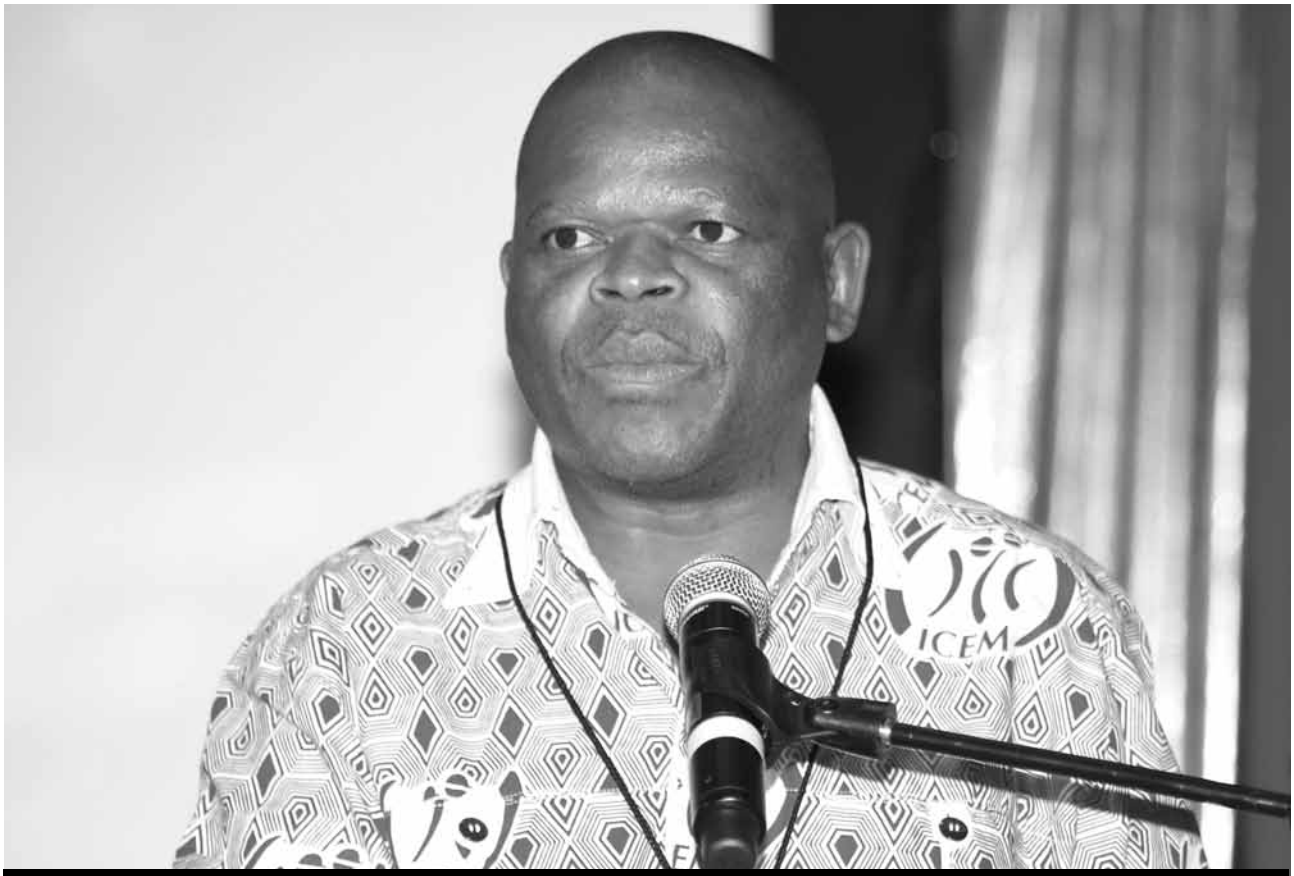
Given the Marievale precedent, Anglo mass dismissals stood on very shaky legal ground. In the end, the company settled with the NUM for a large sum, which certainly aided rebuilding. The final years of the 1980s, however, are remembered by NUM members as a time of repression. 'We got our mines back,' trumpeted managers whom I interviewed. They held onto total control for another two years.

WELKOM MOMENT

In February 1990, FW de Klerk announced his 'great leap forward' and Nelson Mandela was released from jail. Suddenly trouble erupted on the (largely Anglo) mines in the Free State town of Welkom. Black workers, waiting for the cages underground, refused to permit white miners to jump the queue ahead of them as had always been the custom in the past. Frequently white miners were assaulted. James Motlatsi justified such actions in language that referred to 'rights.'

At the same time, in the town of Welkom itself, black political protest marches had to be protected by the police from white vigilante groups. Several blacks were killed. Black South Africans were laying claim to citizenship rights in the new South Africa that was supposedly emerging.

According to Anglo records, there were 25 'queuing disruptions' in March 1990 and 21 in April. White miners, suddenly becoming aware of their vulnerability to collective action underground where they were hugely outnumbered, often refused to descend. Work was seriously disrupted. Union officials and shaft stewards worked closely



William Matlala

NUM general secretary, Frans Baleni, intervened in some of the strikes.

with mine management struggling to restore order. The union became an ally in management efforts to restore production.

In May, at the request of the white mining unions, Minister of Police Adriaan Vlok called a meeting in Welkom that was attended by top executives from the mining houses as well as representatives of the white unions, Cyril Ramaphosa and James Motlatsi. Ramaphosa was impressed by the way the white union leaders confronted the mining bigwigs and envisioned cooperation with them. He proposed regular consultations to deal with mining issues.

Naas Steenkamp of the new Gencor, now president of the Chamber of Mines called several such meetings. In the end, it proved impossible for Ramaphosa to work with the white unions. Racial interests trumped class. The most important outcome of the Welkom meeting was that senior mining executives came to realise that they could work with Ramaphosa, who already had a high profile in the African National Congress (ANC). Rand Mines, facing ongoing disruption at Harmony Mine near Welkom is the clearest case in point. After much disruption they recognised the NUM and called in Ramaphosa in an effort to restore order.

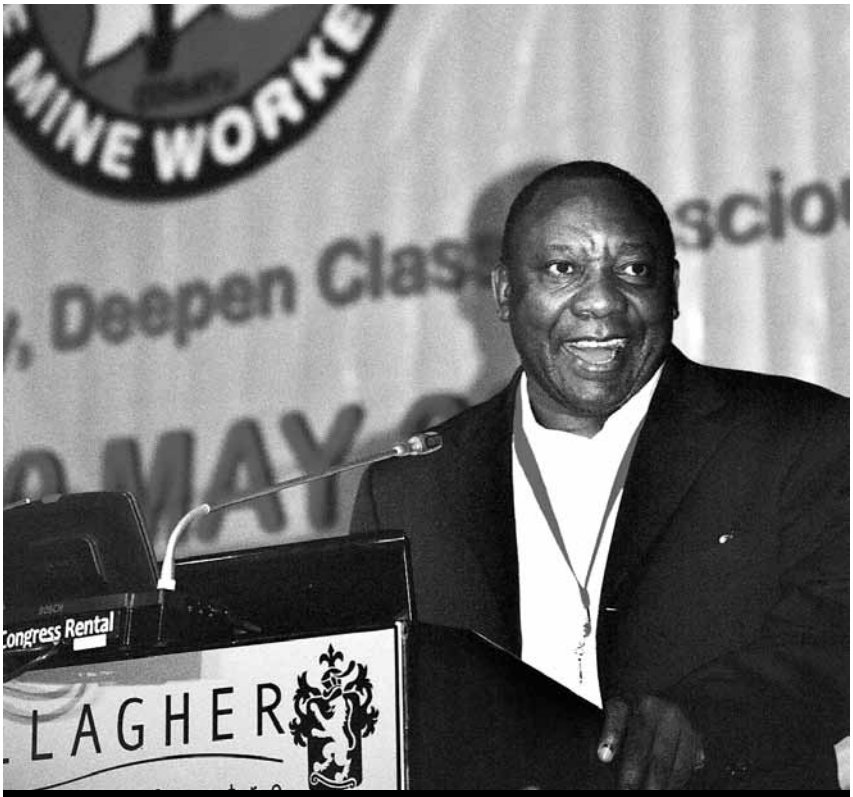
Mining houses developed working relationships with Ramaphosa – and when he left NUM to become secretary-general of the ANC – with regional representatives of the union. Even Goldfields and AngloVaal eventually came on board. The NUM was recognised post-haste on mines that had brutally resisted unionisation for years. Mines began to appoint full-time shaft stewards. The NUM became part of the daily industrial relations routine on gold mines. The meeting in Welkom and the Chamber meetings that followed eventually became springboards for class compromise across the gold mining industry in the new South Africa.

So we have come full circle back to the emergence of our 'historical individual' – the NUM. As GH Mead argued, however, 'the present passes into another present with the effects of its past in its textures.' As I discovered with the rise of Afrikanerdom, so too with the NUM the 'historical individual' whose emergence I sought to understand changed in the very course of that emergence. The very processes of emergence, what I have called 'defining events', themselves marked the textures of the union itself. Thus, the NUM's close identification with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the ANC meant

that ethnic identity issues were elided with citizenship.

In 1991, when Cosatu called for a national stay away to protest the imposition of a value-added tax, the NUM left it up to their branches to decide whether or not to join the stay away. Local NUM branches on most mines very sensibly opted not to stay away. At President Steyn No 4, however, the mine branch decided to leave the matter up to individual miners. But NUM members who were also ANC marshals decided to prevent Basotho miners (who felt the call for the stay away was a South African political issue with little relevance for them) from going to work. Basotho, who had clearly expected some such action, retaliated violently, killing several 'marshals' and burning down the NUM office.

The matter quickly devolved into an ongoing tit-for-tat Sotho/Xhosa faction fight that eventually involved the 'Russians' and led to almost 100 deaths over several days. This was almost ten times the number of deaths recorded during the three-week strike in 1987. Similar actions by South African Tswana-speakers against Basotho migrants with mining skills at the platinum mines also began to involve citizenship issues, as did violent actions by other South African workers against Zulu on the eve of the election as Chief Buthelezi played at cliff-hanging.



William Matlala

Ramaphosa tried to work with white unions but was not successful.

PLATINUM

It is striking that struggles over questions of citizenship and ethnicity (after the killings at President Steyn) were largely restricted to mines that had recently unionised. The kind of militant populism that followed Nap Mayer's ban on union organising and the resultant rise of Lira Setona, was repeated on several Goldfields mines and on Rand Mines' ERPM. In this regard, Anglo's difficult times with the union during its early years paid off. If the union could have pulled off the plan to return to work incrementally in response to the threat of mass dismissals, the union might have been even stronger on Anglo mines.

There is a sense, too, in which the decline of gold mining and the rise of platinum meant starting all over again for the NUM. The fact that Gencor's Impala Platinum mine overlapped with the Bophutatswana Bantustan also enormously complicated labour relations there, although it hardly excused Impala's platinum arm from holding onto an old style of labour relations well after Gencor's gold division had come around to a more enlightened approach.

The union on the platinum mines also was forced to deal with a much larger proportion of contract labour (one-third as opposed to one-tenth on gold mines) and the abandonment of residential compounds for unionised workers (a union demand) that made it much harder to organise even though workers were able to bring their families to the regions where they worked.

Finally, the appointment of full-time shaft stewards, which seemed in 1994 to be a complete advantage for the union, turned class compromise into cooptation. Full-time shaft stewards, paid on a scale commensurate with black officials, were rapidly incorporated into the personnel structures on the mines. Even if union members refused to re-elect them, they retained their positions in the management structures of the mines. This was partly because the mines desperately needed black officials with interpersonal skills, but it also meant the weakening of shaft steward's representative functions for the union. LB

T. Dunbar Moodie, the Society and Work Development Institute, University of Witwatersrand and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY.