

# NUM's defining events

There were six events in the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) history that defined it and led to its growth. These included the aborted 1984 wage strike, racial confrontations, illegal strikes and mass dismissals at Vaal Reef and the overturning of the 1985 mass dismissals and transformation of Gencor, writes **Dunbar Moodie**.

**C**ontrol of the mining industry in the late 1970s was in the hands of six different 'mining houses' (Anglo-American, Consolidated Goldfields, Gencor, JCI, AngloVaal and Rand Mines – more or less in order of their assets) with centralised support (and considerable but diminishing administrative clout) from the Chamber of Mines. In 1980, the Wiehahn Commission recommended (on the advice of Anglo-American but not Goldfields) that black unions be recognised on the mines. The Chamber of Mines accepted this recommendation, which was implemented with varying levels of enthusiasm by the different mining houses.

The head office of Anglo's Gold Division was committed to unionisation. Many of the top managers had had experience in the copper mines in Zambia where they had worked with black unions. Moreover, Anglo was most interested in reforming its productive processes which would require motivated and skilled workers. Anglo announced something of an open house policy on unionisation. Several unions sought to organise the mining industry. Cyril Ramaphosa sought and was granted access to the compounds

and his initiative took off. The mine compounds proved to be ideal recruiting grounds.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) held its first national congress in October 1982. By 1985 it was the largest union in South Africa and one of the fastest-growing in the world. In August 1987, NUM organised the biggest strike in SA history. More than 300,000 workers (mostly on Anglo mines) struck work for three weeks and were forced back to work only by a massive process of mass dismissals.

After several years of strict management control, even on Anglo mines, the national tide began to turn, Mandela was released from jail and the mining companies, seeing the writing on the wall, began to cooperate more closely with the union. Even Goldfields unionised. Despite the decline of the South African gold industry, class compromise (in Erik Olin Wright's sense) became a fact of life on the gold mines.

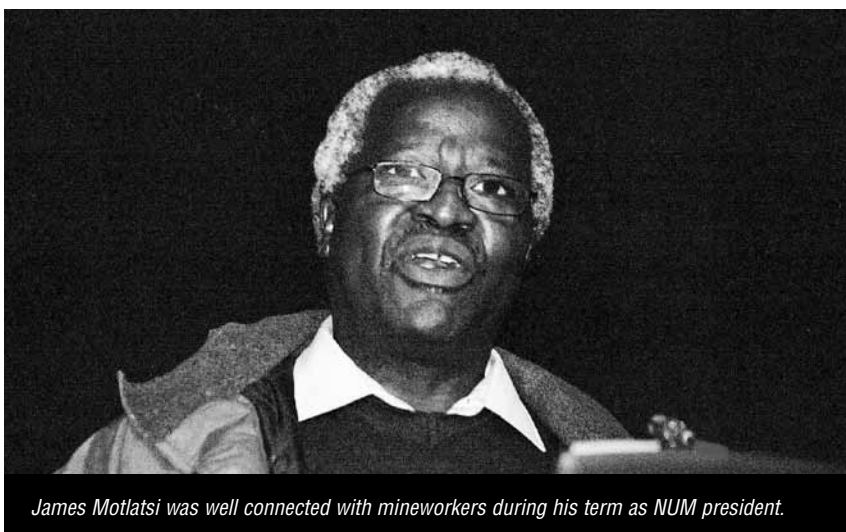
At the overall macro level, then, the story is one of triumphant struggle – a relatively seamless process of restructuring class relations in the gold industry. Nonetheless, such an account gives us no clue about why the NUM

became Anglo's union of choice in the industry and why people joined up so eagerly. Moreover, if one pays close attention to events, at least on Vaal Reefs, where I have my best information, what emerges is not a steady incremental process, but instead fits and starts, false starts, varied strategies, renewed starts and contestation.

If we also pay attention to counterfactual possibilities, as Weber urges in his brilliant critique of Eduard Meyer, the outcome doesn't seem inevitable at all. For all his incredibly hard work and superb organising ability, it was certainly not inevitable that Ramaphosa would lead his organisation to victory.

The 'present' at the time Ramaphosa accepted his commission from CUSA, by no means folded evenly into the NUM's 'new present' as SA's largest trade union. Mine management's and union leaders both took lessons from the struggle. Sometimes they learned from them; sometimes not. Either way, events mattered and outcomes were not inevitable.

Even with potential access, several unions seeking to organise mine workers failed dismally. Some refused to petition the mining houses for access. Some sought



*James Motlatsi was well connected with mineworkers during his term as NUM president.*

access but lacked organisational clout. Cyril Ramaphosa started from scratch. Indeed, he admitted to me his complete ignorance of mines and mining when he was first given his commission. He visited a mine and felt alien and excluded. But he focused on building and accessing networks amongst black mine workers using all his contacts, especially through the church, and by picking up hitch-hikers around the mines.

Ramaphosa managed to tap into important, already existing, networks on the mines. Most important initially, perhaps, were the networks of the Basotholand Congress Party (BCP) and the Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA), who were using the mines – especially in the Free State – as halfway houses for illegal access to Lesotho. Indeed, the election of James Motlatsi (himself a BCP activist) as the first NUM president was surely an indication of the strength of these networks.

There were also networks of South African political activists (Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) as well as African National Congress (ANC) and Congress of South African Students (COSAS), the Black Consciousness (BC) student organisation) who had fled to the mines to escape SA security organisations. Oliver Sokanyile, a personnel assistant (PA) at Vaal Reefs

No. 2, for instance, as a young man had been a leader of the PAC during the Cape Town troubles in 1960 and thereafter in the Transkei. In 1982, he was elected the first regional head of the NUM local organisation at Klerksdorp in the western Transvaal.

As his first union organisers, Ramaphosa recruited a group of young educated black workers who had recently been fired by TEBA, the Chamber recruiting organisation, for requesting a raise. Most important of these, from the point of view of Vaal Reefs, was Puseletso Salae, who became NUM regional secretary in Klerksdorp. He had previously been stationed at Vaal Reefs No. 6, whence he introduced finger-printing techniques to the entire mine. He drew on his networks there. He also had links with the BCP and the LLA.

Ramaphosa requested and was granted access by Anglo and he spent time initially talking about the industry and work conditions to Nigel Unwin, industrial relations manager at Anglo Gold Division. The NUM's first networks on the mines were with skilled black mine workers (PAs, clerks, samplers, even a few team leaders and indunas) who served as an important bridge to ordinary workers.

Anglo had a training centre for PAs at Western Deep Levels where trainees, among other matters,

were introduced to the operation of consultative committees which were being established at all Anglo shafts. Consultative committees deliberately excluded issues such as wages, but trainees were also informed about the working of trade unions, which Anglo was sure were on the way.

When Ramaphosa discovered the existence of this training centre, he simply showed up during one of the lunch breaks and met with the PAs, many of whom became an important cadre of union recruiters at their home mines.

#### **INITIAL DEFINING EVENT: THE ABORTED 1984 WAGE STRIKE**

When I first interviewed Cyril Ramaphosa in 1985, he was furious about what he perceived to be manipulation of the negotiation process by Johan Liebenberg, chief negotiator of the Chamber, in 1984. When negotiations deadlocked, the NUM called for a strike ballot. Members enthusiastically supported the strike. At the last minute (on the Sunday before the Monday strike), the Chamber came back to the union with an offer to improve benefits.

The strike committee present at the Chamber (many of them at this stage still black mine officials) agreed to the terms and it became their responsibility to sell the agreement to their members. By now, however, members were enthusiastically ready to stop work and many had been drinking. At Vaal Reefs, intoxicated workers threatened their representatives and forced them to flee for their lives. The strike went ahead, temporarily, and James Motlatsi had to be called in to talk them back to work. At Western Holdings the police were called in before workers would return to their jobs.

This was perhaps the point at which Motlatsi demonstrated to Ramaphosa his true value. Thenceforth, I was told, they came together as a team. Cyril, it was said,

would negotiate the best possible deal, but James was responsible for selling it to the workers. Both possessed extraordinary skills. Progress for the union could not have happened without both of them. The union was never as effective once Ramaphosa left in 1991 to become general secretary of the ANC.

There was another, even more important effect of the 1984 event. Union recruitment escalated. Management, shaken to the core by widespread worker support for the strike, began to put pressure on black officials to withdraw from the union and many black officials resigned. At the same time, workers had lost confidence in 'representatives' who had voted to abandon the strike at the last minute and ordinary workers were elected as shaft stewards to replace black officials.

Sokanyile, for instance, who retained his deep commitment to the union, was not re-elected as regional chairperson in the western Transvaal. He was replaced by a worker from Hartebeestfontein, an Anglo-Vaal mine where management took a Goldfields line on unions and where union members were thus fiercely radical.

At the 1985 NUM annual congress Ramaphosa and Motlatsi, who ran training sessions for shaft stewards, confronted a much more radical group than before. Ordinary underground workers predominated and their demands were politically radical. It was not enough, they said, for the union to negotiate wages, handle unfair dismissals and intervene in safety matters.

All those were important, but the union also needed to confront the racism built into the migrant labour system. These demands, I argue, signified not only that the union was reaching down into the ranks of underground workers. It was also encountering a 'structure of feeling' that was relatively new to migrant mine workers.

A very rapid sea change had happened in the ranks of mine migrants. In 1970, over 70% of them were recruited from countries to the north of South Africa. By 1985, 70% of migrants were from within the borders of South Africa. Indeed, many of the remaining 'foreign' workers (especially on Anglo mines) hailed from Lesotho, where attitudes were little different from those in South Africa.

Mine wages had increased substantially in the 1970s and the mines (especially Anglo) were recruiting better educated workers with at least Standard 6 (Grade 8) education. Moreover, mining houses were consciously embarking on a programme to create 'career miners', proletarianised workers, who would return regularly to the mines with the skills they had learned there.

These 'new' workers, however, came also with different attitudes to mine work itself. No longer, like the earlier traditionalist migrants, did they have the opportunity of returning to subsistence agriculture and rural village life. Increasingly their senses of self-worth and dignity were invested, not in rural subsistence with mine work as a sort of initiation rite, but rather in mine work as their life work.

Of course, that is exactly what Anglo wanted: committed workers with careers in mining. What they

received in addition, however, was mounting outrage at levels of racial discrimination and exploitation that continued to be part of the mining industry as a whole and underground work in particular. The NUM became a means to confront such racism.

### RACIAL CONFRONTATION & ILLEGAL STRIKES

At the 1985 congress, important strategic decisions focused on worker outrage about racial exploitation. It was decided that, while the central union organisation would continue to negotiate wages, local shaft-level branches would decide on tactics when it came to confronting racial discrimination and white condescension. And confront they did!

Demonstrations broke out all over Vaal Reefs mine in the first months of 1985. Especially Vaal Reefs South, which had so firmly resisted unionisation under Nap Mayer, rose up under his successor, Mike Smith. The union leader at Vaal Reefs South, Lira Setona from No. 9 Shaft, was militant and extremely effective. He was also confrontational. At Vaal Reefs No. 8, Anglo's wealthiest shaft ever, drillers who were required to make ready for blasting (a traditional white privilege), refused to charge up without additional remuneration. Under Lira's leadership, all the



*Cyril Ramaphosa started organising mineworkers from scratch.*

workers at South Mine came out on a wildcat strike about this issue.

Much to the distress of Sokanyile and other established union leaders at Vaal Reefs, Lira refused to negotiate. Sokanyile's position was clear - one negotiated the toughest agreement one could get and then settled for compromise. Setona and his 'regiment' of young followers simply told Sokanyile to clear off and threatened his life. Lira defied Ramaphosa and Motlatsi as well. The result was inevitable - mass dismissals.

In April 1985, 14,000 workers were fired from Vaal Reefs - the entire South Division and some additional supporters from the West. At the same time, AngloVaal fired 3,000 workers who were demanding recognition for the union.

Most of the workers (at least on Vaal Reefs), but none of the identifiable union leaders, were rehired. Back in Lesotho, Setona was assassinated. His populist stubbornness had ended in disaster for the union and for himself. Avoiding another mass dismissal became almost a mantra for union leaders at Vaal Reefs. Ramaphosa himself shared the dread. It was, after all, mass dismissals that obliged him to cave at the end of the 1987 strike.

Managers also took note, however. The mass dismissals at Vaal Reefs No. 8, the milk cow of the entire Anglo stable, seriously disrupted mining operations. A finely-tuned operation with 10,000 workers, No. 8 alone was turning out every two years the same amount of gold as was produced during the entire California gold rush. That level of production was never again achieved.

Management managed to conceal the situation from the union by mining accessible ore, but neglect of development (worsened by the 1987 strike) crippled maximally productive operations for at least the next decade. The mass dismissals

that ended the 1987 strike were carefully manipulated to create as little disruption of production as possible. Even so, Anglo lost a huge amount of money - at least three times what it would have cost to have settled the strike early. Probably more. 1987 was as much about power as about money, as we shall see. The union lost, but at considerable cost to profitability at Anglo.

### 1985 MASS DISMISSALS OVERTURNED

The Wiehahn Commission established an Industrial Court. In order to protect white workers who felt threatened by the rise of semi-skilled blacks, it also insisted on a proper procedure for dismissals. Thereafter, however, the South African law of unfair dismissals was developed by labour lawyers distinctly sympathetic to up-and-coming black unions. This was extremely useful to NUM organisers like Salae who were able to mount effective legal challenges to the powers of compound managers and indunas who had in the past been free to dismiss at will.

In the 1970s there was great turmoil in the mining industry. General Mining, which Anglo had sold to Afrikaner business interests, with the help of Rembrandt, managed to buy Union Corporation out from under the nose of Goldfields. Gencor was created as the third largest gold mining holding company, along with Goldfields and Anglo. From the point of view of workers on Gencor mines this was hardly an advantage. Like Goldfields, Gencor was very much controlled from the top (mine managers were given next to no discretion) and Gencor policy was strongly opposed to any suggestion of black unionisation.

During the 1985 wage negotiations, the Chamber split. Goldfields and Gencor (with AngloVaal) held out for lower increases than Anglo, JCI and Rand Mines. The union called for

a strike on the mines of Goldfields, Gencor and AngloVaal. Traditional repressive tactics prevented strikes on Goldfields and AngloVaal mines. Most Gencor mines continued to work, but Marievale, a relatively small (formerly Union Corporation) mine on East Rand fairly close to the centre of Johannesburg did come out. On orders of the Gencor Head Office, all the workers were dismissed.

Gencor took the NUM to the regular court and the NUM took Gencor to the Industrial Court. The former found in favor of the mine's common law right to dismiss without reason, but the Industrial Court, in a path-breaking decision, declared that, since this was a legal strike, the dismissals were unfair and the workers should be re-employed. On appeal, the Transvaal Supreme Court ruled that the unfair dismissal clause of the new Wiehahn labour law limited common law employer rights. It thus upheld the Industrial Court decision. These court rulings were central to Anglo's decision to pay millions in compensation to NUM after the mass dismissals that ended the 1987 strike.

Meanwhile, at the highest level of Gencor management, Sanlam appointed Derek Keyes (later SA Minister of Finance) as chairman of the Gencor Board. Keyes promptly decentralised mine management and under the leadership of Naas Steenkamp, Gencor industrial relations policy swung 180 degrees. Almost overnight in the middle of 1986, Gencor switched camps. Gencor mines became NUM strongholds. Virtually all the Gencor mines joined those from Anglo and JCI in the 1987 strike. <sup>18</sup>

*The next three defining events will be covered in the next issue.*

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