

Battle for Impala

Amcu grassroots activists' speak

Impala Platinum mine in Rustenburg has become the theatre where the veteran National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and newcomer Association of Mining and Construction Union (Amcu) have locked horns. **Crispen Chinguno** talks to some Amcu shop stewards.

The fierce contestation for domination in the platinum mining sector between the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) and Association of Mining and Construction Union (Amcu) has been well documented and many have attempted to interpret its meaning.

However, there are gaps in information concerning Amcu – who are the faces and what do they represent? Through an account by two grassroots Amcu activists, Mandla and Khaya and some other workers, this article engages these questions. The two are part of Amcu's shaft committee representatives (the five madodas) who have emerged as new shop-floor leaders.

KHAYA: 'FIVE MADODAS ARE BRILLIANT'

Khaya was born in 1965 in the former Bantustan of Ciskei. He grew up there and attended school to Standard 10. Because of limited job opportunities in the area, many of the young men ended up on the mines in the Transvaal.

Khaya could not resist the recruitment drive by Teba (which sourced its labour from the area). He was recruited in 1987 to work for Impala Platinum Mines

in the former Bophuthatswana Bantustan. Hence, like workers from countries in Southern Africa, such as Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland, he was considered a foreign migrant requiring a passport.

His first job was as a general hand on the surface. In those days every mineworker's dream was to work underground as the remuneration was higher and work considered masculine though the risk was more. The doors opened in 1989 when he got a job underground as an equipment helper and was later promoted to panel operator.

When Khaya arrived at Impala, they had no union. Management, in collaboration with the Bantustan regime created a management union called Bonume as a strategy to counter the rise of NUM. However, most workers shunned this puppet union. NUM was barred from organising because it was considered a foreign South African union not registered in Bophuthatswana.

Many black workers joined NUM in 1992 after it fiercely gained recognition. According to Khaya, many joined because it was a democratic workers' organisation which stood up for shop-floor issues and challenged apartheid and the Bantustans.

The recognition of NUM at Impala was preceded by violence which took many forms and many lives. Until January 2012 Khaya described himself as one of its most loyal and dedicated members. However, during the 2012 strike he shifted and became one of the most active members of Amcu.

When the strike broke out in January 2012 Khaya volunteered as a marshal responsible for crowd control and intelligence flushing out impimpis for the new committee at the southern branch. This was the most militant branch where most killings and violent assaults took place. After the strike ended, he was selected as one of the five madodas at his shaft.

Khaya's life in Rustenburg started at number 8 hostel where he first resided. After 1994, workers had the 'freedom' to stay anywhere. He moved into an informal settlement close to work as he wanted to live with his family.

In line with the policy of phasing out hostel accommodation the government is constructing RDP houses near some of the shafts targeting low-income mineworkers living with their families. Two years ago, Khaya became one of the few beneficiaries and moved to the new RDP suburb, Freedom Park, where he got a two-roomed house.



Billy Malumbe: one of Amcu's Five Madodas at Implats.

Despite South Africa's democratic transition, Khaya feels little has changed for ordinary workers in mining despite a platinum boom. He cited squalid conditions in the informal settlements where there is no running water and electricity where many mineworkers live. For the past five years his wages have hardly changed despite adjustments negotiated by the union.

Khaya is a proud member of the five madodas and is optimistic. He believes the new union will not fail as it is driven by people on the ground.

MANDLA: 'STRIKE OPENED MY EYES'

Mandla is married with two children whom he occasionally visits in Lesotho. He was born in 1973 at Hoek in Lesotho. He attended Humleng Primary School up to Standard 7 in 1989 when he left school to take care of the family cattle at its rural homestead. He started looking for a job in 1995 after Lesotho was devastated by drought.

His uncle was working at Impala Platinum in Rustenburg. When Mandla arrived in South Africa it was not easy to get a job. For two years (1995 to 1997) he struggled. He was finally recruited directly by Impala after an aggressive effort

which included moving from shaft to shaft asking for employment.

His first job was as an equipment helper, which is the lowest level for unskilled workers. This involves installing different pipes underground for ventilation and water. Mandla went to the training centre for induction where he learnt *fanakalo* (a language used in the mines).

In 1998 Impala faced a shortage of panel operators and Mandla went to the training centre and was later promoted. Panel operators support hanging walls after blasting. In 2006 he was promoted to loco operator and in 2009 to gang leader responsible for supervision of locomotive staff.

Mandla joined NUM in 1997 'by accident' as he was elected a shop steward but was not a NUM member. He did not reveal this but subsequently joined. He represented workers in hearings and believes he was selected because he is talkative.

A strike over risk cover (insurance) broke out in 2003. To avoid this, Mandla packed his bags and went to Lesotho because of the stories he had heard from senior colleagues in the 1986 and 1991 to 1992 strikes. They warned that 'people were going to die because of the strike'. The previous strikes were marked by violence and killings. Workers were divided between those for and against the strike and it turned into a tribal clash between Basotho and Batswana.

However, in 2003 the strike was peaceful as the workers were united. In another strike in 2009 Mandla did not go to hide in Lesotho. According to him, this was the first time they began to realise that NUM no longer represented them.

PROBLEMS WITH NUM

Khaya, Mandla and other workers reflected on why they had to abandon NUM. According to Khaya

'the problem with NUM is that they would lie about what transpired in the negotiations with the employer. They never said the truth. They always tell us lies...' He argued that NUM never followed the mandate from membership but connived with management.

Another worker argued: 'The union (NUM) has a problem. You take a problem and they don't help. It's just there to help management run the company smoothly. What's the point in us paying them?'

The allegations against NUM also related to corruption within. A number of workers cited the NUM JB Marks bursary fund selection criteria. 'The bursary funds beneficiary selection is not transparent. It is only through corruption with the regional committee for you to get it. If you are not a Tswana from this region you will not get it. The advertisement is only a disguise. They advertise when the places are already filled.'

Another worker argued: 'They forget we elected them and start to load their pockets with bribes from management. In the end they are not able to resolve anything. For them to be where they are we are the ones who selected them. We did not elect them because they are educated but because they are part of us.'

Khaya's perspective was more ideological. He argued that NUM was compromised from the onset by having full-time shaft stewards paid and provided with offices by management. This resulted in co-option of the union. Many of the good union representatives shifted to the management side. Khaya believes that to preserve its independence a union must never accept this compromise. He cited that because of this, NUM at Impala serves management interests.

Another worker agreed: 'Our biggest enemy now is the union.'

It is just too corrupt. I have the experience of a good union in the gold mines and this is not one of them. We have abandoned NUM and moved to the new union. Although we have resigned our employer is still insisting in negotiating with NUM and yet they cannot even dare have a meeting to address us.'

Another worker highlighted an alleged transformation of union leaders: 'When we elect them they will be like us... but we don't know what happens when they go there... one of them used to live with us here in the hostels and once we elected him to be a shop steward a few months he moved to rent in the suburbs and later he had a car...so we don't know what they do to them...'

Other problems related to the share scheme and the paying of terminal benefits to widows, which takes a long time. The workers claimed that union structures no longer represent their interests. They accused union officials of corruption, inefficiency and collaboration with management. Most worker cases were lost because union committees have collapsed and were incompetent. The union representatives were obsessed with getting positions and moving up the ladder and into politics.

Khaya, Mandla and others were asked why they decided to move from NUM instead of fighting from within to change the union. They argued that they have made many attempts but to no avail. However, if the new union fails they at least have the power to remove it.

POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

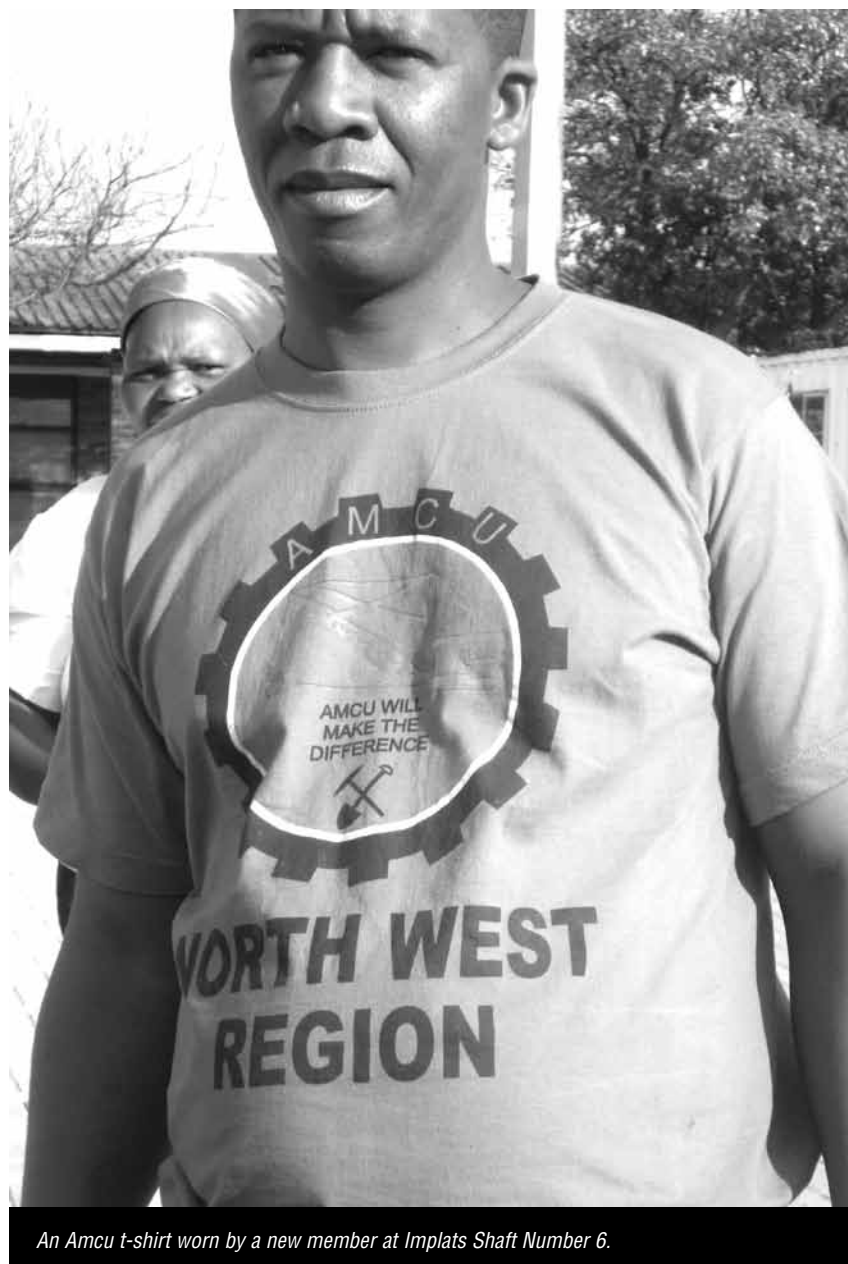
A distinct difference between NUM and Amcu is the language used in mass meetings. In the recent strike NUM used the main local languages, Tswana and Xhosa and some English translations. The interim committee, later Amcu mainly used fanakalo.

NUM has argued that fanakalo has no future in South Africa. It claims it is a slave language used to humiliate black workers. Fanakalo must be disbanded because it 'was crafted by white managers who hated African languages'. It argues that fanakalo works against the career development of black workers. NUM believes that people from other areas must learn local languages as a way of integrating into the local community.

Amcu's Khaya argued that the five madodas are 'strong and

brilliant men' in touch with what is happening on the ground. They use fanakalo 'so that everyone would understand given that most have very limited formal education... we are not educated and cannot all use English'. He claimed that fanakalo is the common language that brings them together irrespective of ethnicity. Khaya and Mandla both have limited English and reflect the constituency they represent.

Another Amcu worker argued: 'We are many and quite a diverse



Kally Forrest

An Amcu t-shirt worn by a new member at Implats Shaft Number 6.

group. Fanakalo to us means togetherness and common understanding. It is the language of the hard workers. That's why Amcu is using it. It is representing us the hard workers on the ground.'

Language is important in enhancing or fragmenting collective worker solidarity and an indicator of an organisation's class representation. The use of language can be an important force for uniting or dividing.

NUM's strategy is assimilation of all ethnic minorities to enhance social cohesion. However, this may make some feel marginalised. On the other hand Amcu perceives language as a tool to build shop-floor solidarity. It uses language to connect to its constituency. Language thus covertly turned into a class issue between NUM and Amcu.

CONCLUSION

Whilst Khaya, Mandla and others on the shop-floor project a strong commitment to Amcu it was surprising that they did not know any of its national leadership and head offices. This raises a number of questions.

There may be a disconnection between the leadership and shop floor on the direction that the new union must navigate. The shop floor does not know what Amcu ideologically represents. This poses a threat, as the workers' cause may be hijacked by opportunists. Amcu has been articulate in highlighting the shortcomings of NUM. However, it has not been clear on how it is going to be different. On the other hand, NUM has apparently become alienated from the shop floor and so workers are justified in defecting to another union. **LB**

Impala strike linking workplace with community struggles

The strike at Impala Platinum mine brought workers together with the community and school learners write **Trevor Ngwane and Botsang Mmope.**

The workers' strike at the world's biggest platinum mine lasted three weeks and resulted in three deaths, inflated the price of the precious metal by 20% and left egg on the face of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leaders and of Anglo Platinum Limited (Amplats). In this article it will be argued that the strike revived the tradition of social movement unionism in an unexpected fashion when it got the active support of local communities even though the workers went out against the wishes of the union and partly in opposition to it.

Amplats, the mining company supplying the world with 25% of the sought-after mineral, provoked what its CEO (Chief Executive Officer) David Brown called 'a sort of civil disorder' when it fired 17,200 strikers and expelled workers from its hostels. This action led to the workers taking their strike into the surrounding communities by holding their strike meetings at the nearby Freedom Park informal settlement and, to show their anger, vandalising and looting scores of local businesses owned by 'whites' and foreign nationals in an ugly instance of fusion of workplace and community struggles.

A railway line that separates Shaft

8 and the shack settlement, was shut down completely by the strike. Not far off there is Phase 1 of an RDP housing development where every government poorly built brick house is surrounded by five or more zinc shacks. These are rented out at about R400 a month to the thousands of miners, mostly migrant workers from different parts of the country and the Southern Africa region, who do not live in the mine's hostel.

There are schools, shops and other essential community facilities that serve the small mining community which falls under the jurisdiction of the Rustenburg local municipality and the Bojanala Platinum district municipality.

On average the miners, mostly rock drillers, winch operators, and other general underground workers, earn about R4,000 a month. It was this class of workers that came out on strike as distinct from the 'miners', that is, the skilled mine artisans with blasting certificates. What angered the 'unskilled' workers was their exclusion from a deal which saw the skilled miners receive bonuses in which NUM was allegedly implicated. This triggered the strike and a demand for a R9,000 minimum wage for all workers at the mine.

SKILLED VERSUS GENERAL WORKERS

Resentment boiled over into open revolt because of a widespread perception by workers that the NUM was serving the interests of the skilled miners and collaborating too closely with the mining bosses. Indeed, when the rock drillers came out on strike the artisans remained on the job thus provoking violence against themselves. In one instance their living quarters, in the form of apartments built by the mining company that are separated by a palisade fence from the surrounding shacks, were besieged for hours by angry strikers in a move to stop them from going to work.

The strikers formed a strike Interim Committee, which replaced the local branch union leadership that was seen as consisting mostly of the skilled miners rather than general workers. This division among workers comes from underlying factors such as recent changes to the labour market in the mines associated with the decline of the mining sector, neo-liberal restructuring and the transition from apartheid to a democratic order.

In particular, it is the outsourcing of certain labour processes which has increased the gap between wages and employment conditions among workers, improving them for the artisans and leading to their deterioration for general workers.

The mining sector has been steadily declining over the past decade or so, but in South Africa platinum mining has been an exception recording high rates of growth and employing more workers. But platinum bosses and workers have not escaped the neo-liberal onslaught with its ruthless cost-cutting measures and the denial by the capitalist state of its social responsibility that affects both the working and living conditions of workers. As a consequence workers have to suffer exploitation and oppression at the workplace in terms of poor wages and precarious employment, and at home in the form of being compelled to live in miserable slum conditions such as in Freedom Park.

The dependence of communities in the platinum belt on mining is stark: most people who live there are either employed as miners or make their living supplying the mine or its workers with goods and services. When the students from the local school bunked classes and joined in the blockading of roads and burning of tyres, methods associated with the rapidly increasing service delivery protests in the country, they said it was their parents that were on strike. Similarly, some street traders who had their businesses attacked preferred to blame mine management for the workers' anger. It is also true that many unemployed people, including those running spaza shops in the area, were once employed by the mine.

Women are notoriously shunned by mine bosses as potential workers. But in the course of the industrial and community action many women got involved actively supporting the strike. Women's interests, like the rest of the community, are directly affected by the miners' wage levels with some actually employed by the mine. Amplats has taken steps to meet the 10% gender equity target set for 2009 by the Mining Charter and typically employs women in low-paying and low-status jobs such as equipping assistants and store issuers.

Unfortunately the NUM, a union with a tradition of social movement unionism, was not in a position to give direction to the spontaneous connection between workplace and community struggles that developed in the course of the strike. The workers went on strike without the union because of its mishandling of the issue of bonuses for skilled miners arguably as a result of having lost touch with its own members, providing poor service, failing to address the challenge of outsourcing and labour market splitting and the

perception among workers that it was collaborating with the bosses.

The angry strikers would not listen to anyone until Julius Malema, the now expelled ANC Youth League leader, addressed them and persuaded them to meet with the union's national leadership. The strike came to an end inconclusively with the bosses promising more talks in July and the workers' Interim Committee now willing to work with the union leadership at head office level. The Association of Mining and Construction Union (Amcu), the rival union which tried to take advantage of the situation appears to have succeeded in its mission and workers are joining it to the detriment of NUM.

BACK TO BASICS

The lesson might be that the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) unions have to prioritise the basics of union organising, including ensuring quality service, worker control and moving away from the union-as-outside-organiser to instilling a sense of ownership and empowerment of the union by its members. Social movement or political unionism must be based on the unity of interests of employed workers and the communities that they live in rather than formal political alliances at the level of top leadership as appeared to have been the case with NUM.

The strike reminds us that power resides in the collective action of ordinary workers and that their interests are common whether employed or unemployed because they face the same enemy. Unions who do not heed this will eventually lose the support and loyalty of workers. **LB**

Trevor Ngwane and Botsang Mmope are members of Socialist Group and Keep Left respectively. Their research into the strike was done under the auspices of the Rebellion of the Poor project run by the University of Johannesburg's Research Chair for Social Change.