

# Decline of mineworkers' compounds

## What does this mean?

On the Rustenburg platinum mines **Andries Bezuidenhout** and **Sakhela Buhlungu** found that the compound system was only one way of housing mineworkers. They explore the accommodation available to workers and question what this means for union organisation and solidarity.

**T**he recent history of Rustenburg in North West province is the story of platinum. Roughly 70% of the world's known deposits of this metal are found around this formerly sleepy agricultural town.

Close to Rustenburg are rural villages which used to fall under the former 'homeland' of Bophuthatswana. The land on which much of the platinum deposits were discovered was under the control of the Bafokeng traditional authority and mining companies had to negotiate royalty deals with its representatives. The government of the 'independent' homeland refused to allow unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) to organise there up until 1990.

But democracy brought about many changes. At the entrance to the town on the N4 highway from Johannesburg is a glitzy shopping mall. New upmarket and high security residential complexes clutter the mountainside alongside middle-income housing estates built to accommodate the rapidly growing middle and upper working classes.

Much of the change is taking place in the new middle-income

suburbs. In the past migrant African mineworkers were confined to single-sex compounds, now many choose to settle with their families in these new suburbs. Some live in apartments which they rent from mining companies while others buy their own homes in sprawling residential areas. Many of these are mine employees in management and supervisory positions, but a growing number come from the upper echelons of the mining workforce, including many NUM activists and shaft stewards.

### MOVE AWAY FROM COMPOUNDS

Up until 1986, apartheid laws required mines to house 97% of their workforce in compounds. However, the system was abandoned even before the formal end of apartheid. One reason was an increase in what people called 'faction fights'.

Another reason for companies to move away from their preference for compounds was the 1987 miners' strike. The NUM showed that it was able to use compounds in order to control the strike. This was ironic, because compounds were designed to control workers. Today the requirements have

changed. The Mining Charter requires mines to reduce the number of workers who live in compounds.

Single-sex mine compounds were more than a convenient housing solution to the mining industry. Compounds served as a mechanism of control. They started at the diamond mines in Kimberley, and the gold mines, and later platinum mines also adopted the model. Compounds typically housed up to 5 000 men, who slept in large dormitories. They were conveniently located near mine shafts, so large numbers of workers could report for work at short notice.

The compound enabled a mining company to control a worker's whole life. Access was controlled and workers had to ask for permission to leave the compound for reasons other than work. Women who visited from rural areas were only allowed to see their husbands in a building called the *skomplaas*. This was located near the compound, but usually fenced off. The *skomplaas* could only accommodate a limited number of visiting women and their miner husbands for very limited periods of time and under very stringent conditions.



Andries Bezuidenhout

Old style single sex compounds – visiting wives had to see their husbands in the “skomplaas”

Mining companies used a strict hierarchy to control workers. A white hostel superintendent had overall responsibility. Workers were subdivided into ethnic groups and were put under the supervision of ‘traditional leaders’, or *izinduna*. Their power was backed up by mine constables, armed with batons and knobkerries. Within each dormitory the *induna* delegated authority to the *sibonda*, who had to police noise levels, cleanliness, and personal hygiene.

Mining companies also controlled the intake of food. Food was often of a very low quality and led to protests. Concessioned mine stores, known as *kwamashonisa*, ran a monopoly on foodstuffs and consumer goods such as clothes, radios, and bicycles. Beer halls were also controlled by the mine companies and were located in compounds. A further important element of the compound was the presence of a public address system, which could be used to make announcements and communicate orders.

All of this meant that mining companies and their white supervisors intervened in the most private spheres of miners’ lives,

from cooking food to making love. The president of the NUM, Senzeni Zokwana, told delegates to a recent NUM congress, “Dehumanising living conditions are one of the issues that have stripped the dignity of mineworkers, the core producers of our mineral wealth that anchors our economy.”

It was this attack on the dignity of mineworkers and their families that led to some of the fiercest resistance. Often resistance was crushed by the industry and the state, such as in the mineworkers’ strike in 1946.

But since its formation in 1982, the NUM has succeeded in capturing the compounds. This is one of the reasons for the union’s spectacular success. It succeeded in subverting the hostel hierarchy. The power of the *izinduna* was broken and taken over by elected committees.

The union also took control of the dreaded public address system and used it to call its own meetings and to communicate with workers. The union had access to stadiums for mass meetings, and could set up offices in the hostels. An instrument of control was turned into an instrument of solidarity.

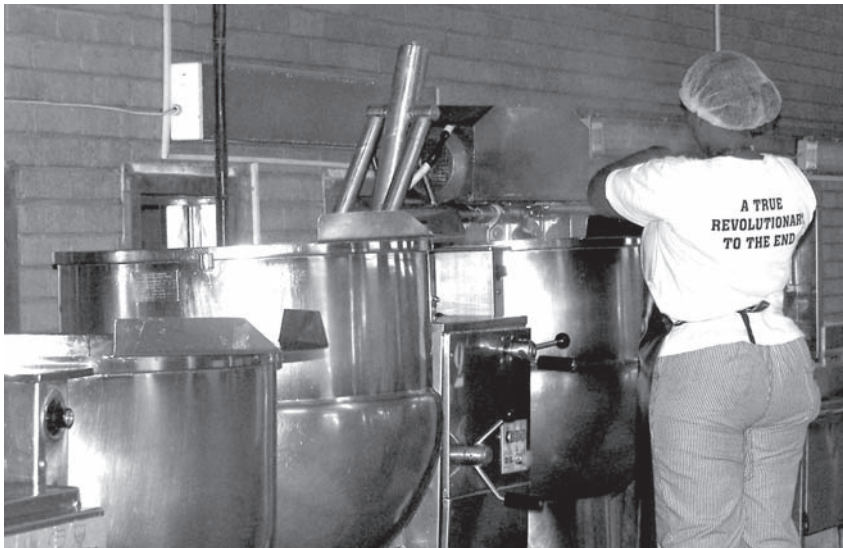
But what does the decline of the compounds mean for the NUM? Rustenburg tells an interesting story.

#### VARIETY OF ACCOMMODATION

If you turn off the highway and drive north towards Sun City, you encounter some of the shafts where platinum is mined. Here, more changes to the landscape are visible. Next to the mine shafts you still see the old single-sex compounds, where the majority of mineworkers were housed in the past. But many of these compounds are being converted into units that accommodate smaller numbers of people and provide a greater degree of privacy and comfort.

During our visit we saw several kinds of conversions of compounds. Some are converted into small flats, where four mineworkers share two bedrooms, a living space, a bathroom, and a kitchen. Then there are those where each worker has his own room but bathrooms and toilets are shared. Another model involves the conversions of large rooms into smaller dormitories where about four to six workers sleep and share common spaces such as a shower, toilet and a kitchenette.

Andries Bezuidenhout



*Cooking up a revolution: food preparation in an outsourced hostel kitchen*



*Many miners save their living out allowances and live next to mines in shacks*

Sections of some compounds have been converted to accommodate women miners, who are joining the industry in increasing numbers. Conversions mean that workers have more privacy than in the old days when up to 20 men used to share a dormitory with bunk beds. But, despite the longstanding demand of the union for the conversion of compounds into family units, many mineworkers still prefer not to bring their families to the mines.

A new management ideology and approach to compounds is emerging in the mining areas. Some companies now refer to compounds as 'residences' and old forms of control have either been relaxed or control is exercised jointly with the unions, mainly the NUM.

Since workers now have a say in running and controlling compounds, they tend to see them as spaces that are safe from crime, with the union acting as a

gatekeeper. At some compounds children can be seen playing on the lawns.

Unlike in the past compounds today are a hustle and bustle of small business activities. These range from privately owned driving schools, laundries and spaza shops to taverns, barber shops, phone booths and canteens.

In addition, more formal business organisations provide services to residents. In most compounds TEBA Bank provides formal banking services and operates ATM machines while legal insurance companies such as *Scorpions* and *LegalWise* have offices. BEE companies, many of them part-owned by former political activists, have also found new business opportunities, particularly to run outsourced catering services, to undertake construction work, to convert compounds and to run entire compounds.

Workers employed permanently by mining companies tend to live in converted compounds. However, a third of all platinum mine workers are not hired by the mining companies directly but work for subcontractors usually on fixed-term contracts. They are paid less, and their income is never secure. Their employers often intimidate workers into not joining unions such as the NUM and some subcontractors form sweetheart unions for their employees.

Workers employed by subcontractors, many of them from neighbouring countries, are usually accommodated in old-style compounds, with a madala-line block around the perimeter and collective bathrooms and toilets in the middle. An example of this is Impala's Number 1 Contractors' Hostel, a compound that exclusively houses employees of subcontractors. So clearly things



have not changed for the better for all mineworkers.

### IMPLICATIONS

Many workers prefer not to live in these compounds any longer. Mining companies now pay a living-out allowance of around R1 200 per worker per month. Right next to most of the compounds around Rustenburg are informal settlements, where many of these workers set up tin houses. Many of these settlements depend on the compounds for clean water.

Apart from informal settlements, there are rural villages such as Phokeng and new RDP housing developments near the shafts. In addition, some mineworkers rent backyard rooms in these communities and formerly white suburbs and in the new housing developments in towns. Some of the better paid mineworkers buy houses in town.

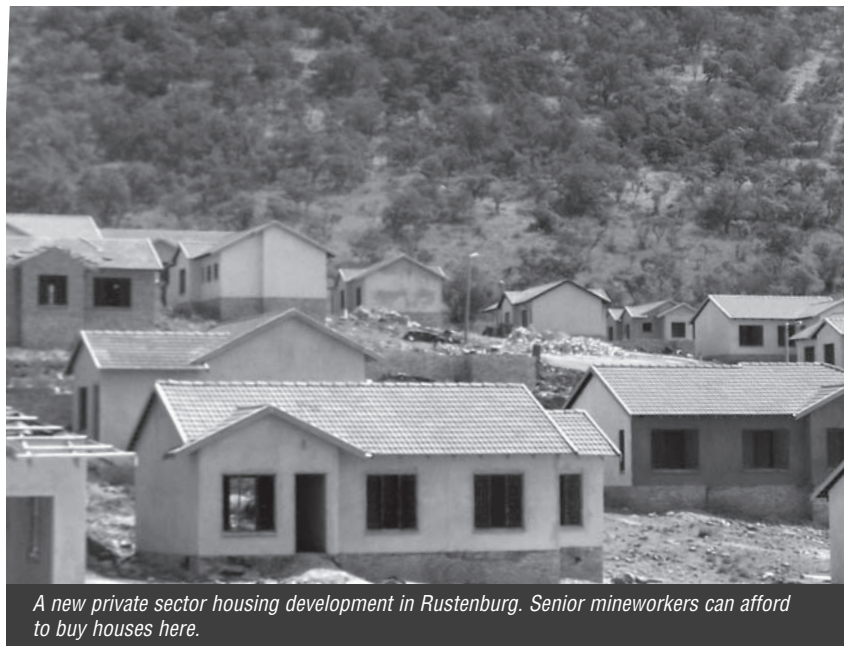
This choice of accommodation for black mineworkers has its own contradictions. Where labour was compounded in the past and used this to organise solidarity, this choice has led to new divisions which undermine old solidarities. These divisions are between permanent and contract, South Africans and foreigners, men and women and finally, compound residents and those who live outside compounds.

Our survey of NUM members in 2005 found that mineworkers who live in compounds are more likely to attend union mass meetings compared to those who live in other forms of accommodation. The implications of this for union organising are clear. New residential patterns are leading to a decline in participation in union activities. The NUM is responding by arranging meetings at times when workers come back from underground shifts



*Women from informal settlements collecting water from nearby compounds*

Andries Bezuidenhout



*A new private sector housing development in Rustenburg. Senior mineworkers can afford to buy houses here.*

to accommodate those who live far from the shaft.

Whereas there is a fragmentation of residential patterns, the migrant labour system is resilient. The resulting cleavages among workers are a threat to solidarity and existing ways of organising. This does not mean that compounds have become redundant. But clearly for the NUM there is a need to rethink the organising model based only on full-time employed workers, who live in compounds only.

The NUM will have to forge new forms of solidarity that involve families, communities, and local government. The stakes for individuals if they lose their jobs are much higher when entire families are settled near a mine. LB

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