

Interview: James Motlatsi, president of NUM

JAMES MOTLATSI speaks to **LABOUR BULLETIN** about the union's 1989 Congress which was held in April, about the political situation, and about resistance to Anglo's campaign of repression on the mines.

Labour Bulletin: *NUM was quite battered and weakened by repression after the 1987 strike. Judging by the congress has the union recovered, or is it still weakened?*

Motlatsi: At the 1987 congress NUM took important resolutions, such as the resolution on "Mineworkers take control". Immediately after the congress, workers implemented the resolutions at a number of mines, particularly the collieries. Repression started in the mining industry not only because of the strike, but because of what happened after the congress, before the strike. The mining bosses realised that NUM is a union which does not just adopt resolutions for the sake of adopting them.

They wanted to smash the union in a gentle way, because the present pol-

itical situation makes the state and employers reluctant to use tactics such as banning organisations or restricting leaders. The attack they used was to dismiss workers. They aimed to destroy the structures of the union - that is why they dismissed leadership at national, regional and branch level. Not only leadership in structures, but activists at shaft level. Some leaders were deported to neighbouring states, and refused entry back into South Africa.

They wanted to demobilise the union and discourage workers from being members. Dismissals were followed by repression - the derecognition of shaftsteward agreements, the installation of mine security all over the shafts, surrounding hostels with security fences, the ID system restricting access to mine property, and an increase in assaults

by white miners and black supervisors. It was clear the mine bosses wanted to destroy the union in a subtle way.

In 1988 we had our special conference. The morale was very low, because of what I have mentioned. But an important resolution was adopted, to rebuild our structures and go forward regardless of repression.

Indeed, we succeeded. The congress this year was well attended, in spite of management's refusal to give time off to some delegates. Because of the determination of the workers some delegates took unpaid leave. As was planned, we had 601 delegates from 16 regions.

We in NUM thought that the 5th

JAMES MOTLATSI, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, was born in Lesotho in 1951. He worked for over 17 years in the mining industry - first as a rockface worker, then as a driller, and later as a team leader. After that he was employed as a personnel assistant at Western Deep Levels. Motlatsi has been active in NUM since its inception in 1981, and was elected president in 1987. Dismissed in the 1987 strike, he was voted full-time president after this year's NUM Congress. ☆

Congress in 1987 was marvellous - it was well-organised, the deliberations were good. But the 6th Congress this year was better. Deliberations were strong, healthy, and a number of important resolutions were adopted unanimously after long debate and amendments. This was the most powerful congress since the inception of NUM in 1982.

Labour Bulletin: *Could you describe the significance of the resolutions?*

Motlatsi: The congress focused on problems facing members on the shaft-floor. It focused on the structure of wages in the industry as a whole. It also focused on the political situation in the country. Our members showed they are not only fighting for bread and butter, today they are aware that the real problem is a political one. Today they are aware of the cause of oppression on the mines, the cause of poverty wages, the cause of migrant labour.

Our resolution on the constitutional guidelines of the ANC states that NUM is to organise conferences at shaft, branch, regional and national level to discuss the guidelines. We will push the same resolution to the COSATU congress in July, that COSATU should do the same.

Then when the decision is taken to go and discuss the constitutional guidelines with the African National Congress we will be able to put forward our thinking on the guidelines, which will be the thinking of the work-

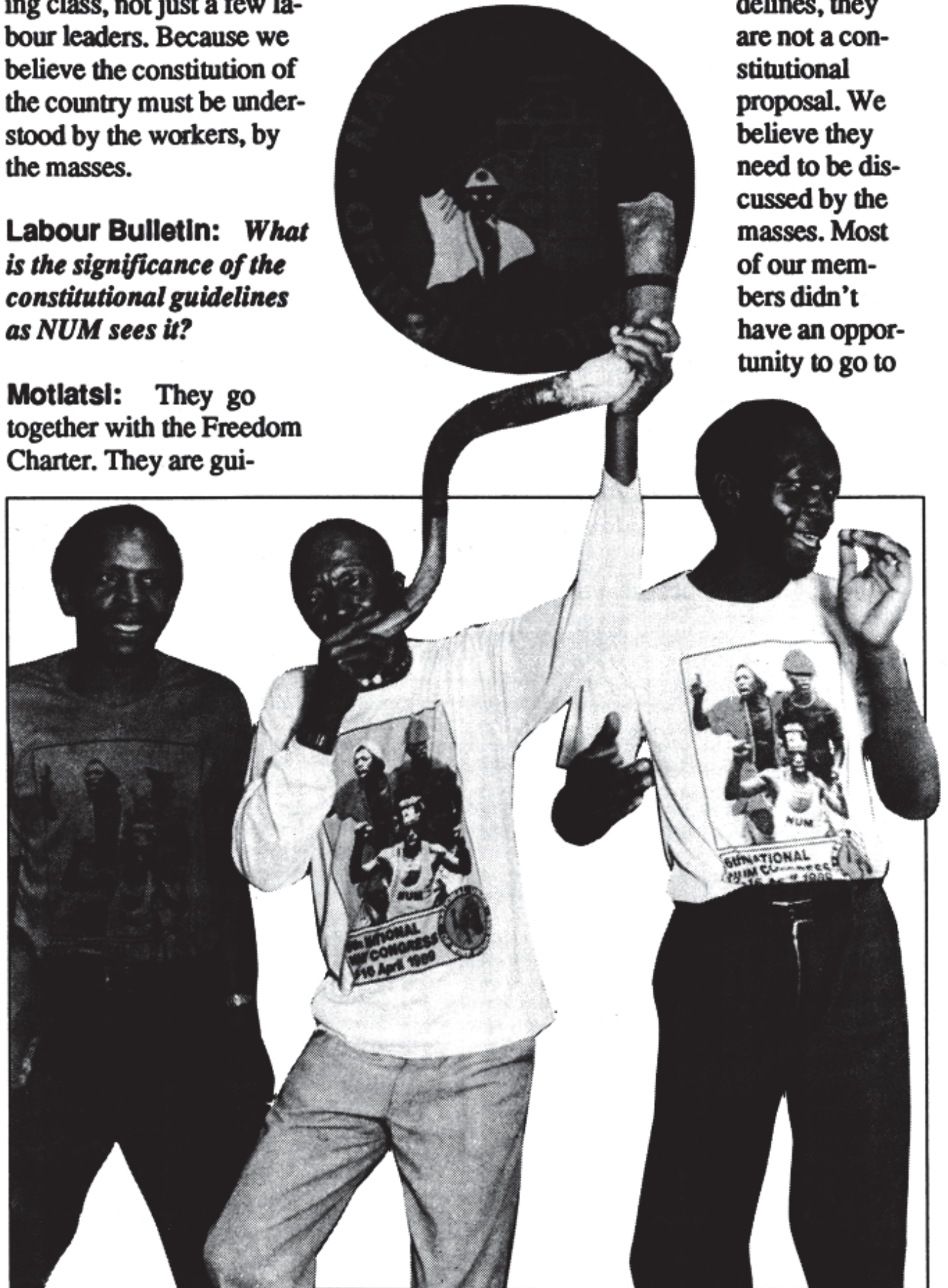
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ing class, not just a few labour leaders. Because we believe the constitution of the country must be understood by the workers, by the masses.

Labour Bulletin: *What is the significance of the constitutional guidelines as NUM sees it?*

Motlatsi: They go together with the Freedom Charter. They are gui-

delines, they are not a constitutional proposal. We believe they need to be discussed by the masses. Most of our members didn't have an opportunity to go to



Mineworkers celebrate at NUM's 1989 congress

Photo: Cedric Nunn/Afrapix

school. Most documents such as the guidelines are in English, and the people who discuss them are usually educated. Our resolution makes it possible for our members to discuss and understand the guidelines.

Labour Bulletin: *Why is it important at this point to discuss the guidelines?*

Motlatsi: It's important, if one looks at changes internationally. In countries which were colonised, workers never play an important role. That brings conflict after liberation, because the constitution becomes a problem to the mass of people in that country.

We as NUM play an important role in the economy of the country, and we believe we must play an important role in the changes that are coming. We must discuss every proposal. We must participate in determining the way forward.

Labour Bulletin: *NUM has always had a close relation with the MUN, the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia. How does NUM see the current situation in Namibia and what will happen in the future?*

Motlatsi: The congress resolved to give support to the Namibian people - not only moral, but material support. Immediately after the congress we sent our co-operatives co-ordinator to Namibia. They requested this, as there will be thousands of exiles returning to Namibia and they want to prepare

for that. We are also prepared to send our staff to help them run their offices on day to day work, so that they are free to go and campaign for the election. We can't campaign for their elections, they have to handle that.

We hope that the entire labour movement, and the mass democratic movement, will give assistance to the Namibians. We hope progressive lawyers and doctors also give help. Because the regime is going all-out to give assistance to its puppets there. We believe that a victory for SWAPO will be a step forward for our struggle.

Labour Bulletin: *How do you see the situation regionally in Southern Africa?*

Motlatsi: South Africa is setting the pace regionally because it dominates the economy. Even governments which are anti-apartheid cannot be effective because their economy is dependent on South Africa. South Africa also actively destabilises those countries.

If SWAPO wins the elections in Namibia, what will South Africa's attitude be? Can you see common ground between anti-SWAPO forces in Namibia and UNITA in Angola? There you have a base for destabilisation.

Labour Bulletin: *Nonetheless, NUM has put forward the slogan, "A victory for SWAPO is a victory for us".*

Motlatsi: That is a very good slogan, and we believe in it. But there are

dangers facing SWAPO.

At independence Machel said, "The struggle continues." He realised that as long as there is oppression in South Africa it will be very difficult for neighbouring states to enjoy their inde-

pendence. It is very good to know that the Mozambicans are sympathetic to our struggle, but what kind of assistance can they give us now? Is there any?

That is why the mass democratic movement must go all out now to provide any assistance or expertise the Namibian people may need, to build the ground now. They must be able to counter these forces now even before they win the elections.

Labour Bulletin: *How do you see the situation internationally, and especially the question of negotiations? It is being placed on the agenda by Thatcher, and there also seems to be pressure on the ANC.*

Motlatsi: The international pressure comes with a hidden agenda. There are still stumbling blocks between the ANC and the regime.

The Namibian situation is a lesson we have to learn. Even if the ANC reaches the stage where it has to compromise its own demands, we as the working class inside this country must be ready to put the pressure which the



ANC may not be able to put.

In Namibia now, they wholly depend on the external wing of SWAPO. The SWAPO internal wing is not so strong that it can put pressure inside Namibia. We must be able to put pressure inside

and outside when we reach that stage of negotiations - we must be able to negotiate from a powerbase so that we are not overpowered. The balance of forces at the time will determine the terrain of negotiations.

The balance of forces does not only mean the military balance of forces. There are forces inside the country. To start with, there are employers who are supporting apartheid one way or another. We as the working class will have to unite and counter that. So the working class, the trade unions and employers are all forces which have to play an important role.

One cannot rule out negotiations. Even MK was not formed to overthrow the government militarily. They resorted to that to put pressure on the ruling class to come to the negotiating table. We have not been against negotiations right from the beginning.

Labour Bulletin: *There is an argument that we must avoid negotiations, as they will sell out the working class. What is your response?*

Motlatsi: If you look at the role of the working class now, you cannot go to the negotiating table without the views of the working class. In other countries the working class did not play an important role. That is why we say the working class has to play not only an important role, but the leading role in our liberation.

Labour Bulletin: *According to NUM what is the way forward on the anti-apartheid conference (AAC)?*

Motlatsi: It was a very important conference, which is why it was banned. It will have to continue. The COSATU congress in July will have to decide how to do that.

Labour Bulletin: *What are the aims of the AAC?*

Motlatsi: The aim is to bring together organisations with different ideologies and political views but opposed to apartheid, to draw a line and say the real enemy is apartheid. Sometimes it seems the differences between anti-apartheid organisations are greater than the differences between these organisations and apartheid itself. What is important is to bring all these together and draw up a programme of action against apartheid itself.

There are criticisms from within our ranks. Some are saying why should we invite Wynand Malan, why should we invite so-and-so. But the fact is we are all against apartheid. Let us set a programme to eradicate apartheid. After that we will see if we can

solve our problems. It's a starting point to bring together all who are opposed to apartheid, so that we can set a base for tomorrow. Otherwise the organisations that were anti-apartheid will fight amongst themselves once apartheid is eradicated.

Labour Bulletin: *What is the role of the mass democratic movement in such an alliance?*

Motlatsi: The role of the mass democratic movement is to set the pace, draw up a programme, and to play a uniting role. It has to seek common ground with other anti-apartheid forces, even to go inside the ranks of apartheid to try to grab some of the people to our ranks. The mass democratic movement should not take an arrogant stand. We have to show daily that apartheid is wrong, and win people over to follow us.

That conference would have been the first to get forces even from within parliament. To isolate apartheid is a very important weapon.

Labour Bulletin: *Does the formation of a broad anti-apartheid front not force the mass democratic movement to compromise its position? For example, there will be forces there which support a free enterprise system, and who oppose the Freedom Charter.*

Motlatsi: The AAC is not meant to discuss the future economy of the country. We know our positions. The conference is not supposed to change

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the positions of the different organisations. If those differences are debated at the conference it will not achieve anything. It will divide the people completely. That is where it is important to understand the two stages of our struggle.

policy of alliances with progressive organisations - essentially the United Democratic Front and its affiliates. NUM proposed the same policy at the 1987 COSATU Congress, and it was adopted. Looking back, how do you view that policy?



Mineworkers - the mass democratic movement depends on their involvement at grassroots level and their participation in community issues

Photo: David Lurie/Afrapix

The Freedom Charter states that everybody will be allowed to vote, it will be democratic. Democracy won't only exist to put people in power, it will also determine the type of economy. I believe in a planned economy, a socialist economy. But I don't believe it should be imposed on people. It is a long process. It is not as easy as some people think.

Labour Bulletin: *In 1987 NUM adopted the Freedom Charter and a*

Motlatsi: At the COSATU Special Congress last year COSATU resolved to convene an anti-apartheid conference. If the UDF was not banned it would have been the organisation to take that step. In other words, that showed that COSATU was willing to take political responsibility, and to take on the tasks of other organisations that were banned.

COSATU has also taken initiatives on meeting with NACTU, and is discussing the ANC constitutional gui-

delines. These also show that COSATU is taking on the tasks that UDF would have taken. This is the result of COSATU adopting the Charter and a policy of alliances.

Labour Bulletin: *So has the alliance made the sort of progress you were hoping for?*

Motlatsi: Not really. The alliance developed more at the national level and at the level of structures. There has not been enough progress at a grassroots level. It is easy at a national level. But when we adopted the policy we envisaged an alliance at all levels, and not just involving structures, but involving mass membership. So that if organisations are banned or leadership is detained, the masses are able to continue the work of the organisations and the alliance.

Labour Bulletin: *My impression, though, is that in places like Kattlehong and Johannesburg the alliance is quite strong at the local level.*

Motlatsi: I'm talking specifically from the perspective of the mineworkers. We have not established this alliance at the grassroots.

Labour Bulletin: *That raises a question. Most mineworkers live in isolated compounds, far from the townships. What does the alliance with the community mean in this situation?*

Motlatsi: We do have married

quarters in the townships. Community structures must be established there, but they haven't been. Even in the compounds, they should establish links with the community organisations. Especially now, mineworkers are often meeting in the townships because the union cannot get access to the mines. For example we are using the YMCA in Soweto. Community members should be coming to those meetings but they are not.

We believe that the community and the workers are the same thing. When workers knock off they go back to the community. Community members should attend every union meeting, and union members should attend every community meeting.

Labour Bulletin: *Last year UDF and the SA Youth Congress were banned. Many civics were smashed and some, such as Soweto Civic Association were banned. Isn't this one of the factors that has made it difficult to build the alliance?*

Motlatsi: You mention the banning of the Soweto Civic, but that's exactly where you find resistance continuing. They have been banned, but there are new ways of carrying on. To give an example, in the period of 1984-86 the youth were very militant. They were confronting authority daily in the townships. They were *toyitoying* in the streets. Now that militancy, or that form of struggle, has been crushed.

But you have new forms of struggle, such as the rent boycott. You

have structures that you don't even know the names of. You find a committee negotiating with the council - where do they come from? They are doing exactly the work of the Civic. Its members are Tutu - a minister; Chikane - a minister; Ramaphosa - a trade unionist; Sister Bernard Ncube - also from the church. And when they come from negotiations they report back to the people.

If the bannings were effective you would find nothing. Instead you find new structures and new struggles. That is how it should be. We need to adapt our strategies and choose the terrain.

Labour Bulletin: *It seems that the repression facing NUM on the mines is very similar to the repression in the communities. I imagine there are similar lessons to be learnt in dealing with this repression.*

Motlatsi: I do not like to talk about repression in the mines or anywhere else as if it was different from repression in the communities. Repression in South Africa is one. It is just that its form and the way it is practised differ in different places.

Repression on the mines operates under different conditions from repression in the townships. You have to analyse these differences so that you can develop the right approach to working under repression.

As far as we are concerned, the mining companies are a pillar of apartheid. All the oppressive measures come from the mining industry. The

state of emergency is the order of the day in the mining industry, it has been permanent since the mining industry was started. In the mining industry there is no freedom of speech, no freedom of association, no freedom that you may name. None.

The mine is a government by itself - it has its own military with its own military equipment. They ran the hostels for over one hundred years with their own military. Detention without trial started there, in their detention barracks. People are detained there without being taken to the SA Police.

So repression started in the mining industry. Recently though, around the time NUM was formed, some mining companies started to relax their repression. In particular Anglo American, which is well-known as a liberal company. But immediately after the strike they reversed everything by 30 or 40 years. The company that used to be the worst, Goldfields - today it's better than Anglo American.

Labour Bulletin: *I want to focus on shopfloor issues at this stage. How are the recruitment and anti-repression campaigns progressing?*

Motlatsi: I wouldn't say they have made so much progress. After the strike, with dismissals of over 50,000 workers and the loss of members, our membership dropped from 260,000 to between 180,000 and 190,000 paid up. Through the recruiting campaign we went to our congress this year with 240,000 paid up members. Within less than a year our recruitment has

become a success.

The anti-repression campaign has not yet been formally launched, although there are structures in some areas. It will link with all the other campaigns - the Living Wage Campaign, the health and safety campaign, Save the Patriots, the anti-Labour Relations Act and others. For us in NUM having the different campaigns under different sub-committees is simply a formality. We cannot use one strategy - the mining houses oppress us in different ways. We need different strategies. We believe you cannot run one campaign apart from the others.

Our objective is to organise 400,000 members by our 1991 congress. We are not only looking for numbers, we should be able to say we have achieved these wages, we achieved this in health and safety, and we saved so many of our patriots.

Labour Bulletin: *Before the 1987 strike you had many structures on the mines - the shaftsteward committees, health and safety structures, education structures, and so on. After the strike, with the repression, many structures collapsed. What progress have you made in rebuilding*

them?

Motlatsi: We have rebuilt all the main structures - that is the constitutional structures. They are operating quite successfully, from shaftstewards' committees up to branch and regional committees. At present we are busy rebuilding health and safety structures and education structures. Those three structures are not sufficient - that is why

we have established Save the Patriots, anti-repression and other structures. We would like to involve as many of our members as possible on a daily basis.

To have more than one structure is very important. That lesson we learnt on 12 August 1987. The whole regional structure was detained at Klerksdorp. But we

had education and health and safety structures, and the members of those structures immediately brought them together and formed an alternative. Now we would like as many structures as possible. Each and every member must give himself a task.

Labour Bulletin: *Isn't there a danger of too many structures, and a resulting lack of co-ordination between them?*

NUM FIGHTS FOR:

- A living wage
- Decent housing and an end to the compound system
- Better health and safety
- No job reservation or racism
- More control at the workplace
- Unity

Every mineworker a NUM member

Motlatsi: There would be a danger if the structures were autonomous and not accountable - then they could pull in different directions. But all of the structures I have mentioned are accountable and subordinate to the constitutional structures - the shaftstewards committee at shaft level, and the BEC and REC at other levels. It is the role of the union president to coordinate all the campaigns. So there is no danger of going in different directions.

There is a need to train individuals in the structures to be aware of the role of the structures and of himself as an individual. So if all others are detained or dismissed and the structure ceases to exist and he is left alone, he knows what to do. It would be a disaster for him to do nothing. He must know exactly the next step.

Labour Bulletin: *What response have you had from Anglo to your repression report?*

Motlatsi: Their first response was to run a propaganda campaign in the press which tried to make NUM responsible for violence. Secondly, they pushed the code of conduct as an answer to repression, to seem concerned. We are not opposed to a code of conduct. But we don't want a code that is like a disciplinary machinery, we want a code that will improve industrial relations in the mining industry. We are negotiating this with Anglo at the moment.

We believe it would be best to negotiate a code of conduct at indus-

try level, rather than with the different mining houses, but the Chamber of Mines pulled out of that.

We are still battling to get access to mines where Anglo has refused access. They are trying to make impossible conditions, like demanding that mine security or management must be present at all our meetings. Shaftsteward recognition is still withdrawn at many mines. But we believe that through our structures and recruiting, and through our campaigns, they will have to talk. Because NUM is here to stay. This is not the 1940s.

Labour Bulletin: *How does the NUM negotiating team maintain contact with the membership?*

Motlatsi: In the negotiations with the Chamber - we negotiate separately with De Beers and other independent mines - the negotiating team is formed by the national office-bearers and representatives from each branch, so that there should be no problem with report-backs. After each and every negotiation the members of the team will report back to their branches. It goes straight from negotiations down to the branches, rather than through the executive and the RECs.

The number of reps depends on the size of the branch. A branch with 15 - 20,000 members will send 2-3 reps, whereas a branch with 3,000 members will send one. The regional congresses discuss demands, which then go to national congress. There a resolution on demands is adopted. From there the national office-bearers

fill in the resolution, and take it to the NEC. The NEC finalises the demands and sends them to the Chamber and the branches of NUM.

Labour Bulletin: *Last year the pro-business newspapers were saying that at last NUM is more responsible because agreement was reached without a strike. Your response to that?*

Motlatsi: You know what we were in 1988. In this country if you can't move because of repression they say you have come to your senses.

Labour Bulletin: *What do you expect to happen this year?*

Motlatsi: This year we are facing a number of problems. The Chamber has proposed that we negotiate coal separately from gold, which is a problem in itself. They have also proposed to hold separate negotiations for profitable goldmines and marginal goldmines. Their strategy is to divide us. We might have to go into dispute from the beginning.

We are going to have to think carefully and develop a strategy that will work. The new wage policy decided at congress is to demand a national minimum wage, rather than a percentage increase. We are trying to close the gap between wages at different mining houses. NUM is also pushing to narrow the gap between wages in different job categories. We have come with a unifying position. They are coming with a divisive strategy.

Coming to your question about

whether there could be massive action again, there are a number of factors to consider. The industry provokes workers time and again. Mass action cannot be ruled out. Our members will have to decide on that. We are confident that they are ready for action. The major problem is communication between union structures and membership.

But 1989 is the year when the Chamber wants to split the union. We don't have to fight our battle on the terrain of the enemy. We have to set the pace and fight the battle on our terrain. Our policy has already set our terrain, but there is a need to develop strategies within our policy. That is the task of the NEC.

To try and divide our negotiating team into three camps - that is the terrain where they want us to take immediate industrial action, so that they can say, "Look - you are on a profitable mine. We are prepared to pay you. Why are you on strike?"

The Chambers expect strikes. I don't want to anticipate what will happen except to say that we don't have to fight on the enemy terrain.

Labour Bulletin: *So going on strike can also be enemy terrain?*

Motlatsi: A strike cannot be ruled out, it is our last resort. But you have to think how you will conduct a strike. Will you conduct a strike as you did in 1987? The answer is no. The answer is no because after the strike they saw the loop-holes and mistakes they had. We saw the weaknesses and

loop-holes on our side. Because we made quite a number of mistakes, we have to acknowledge that. We have to correct them.

To show that the mining houses realised some of their mistakes: one of the Anglo chairmen, Peter Gush, said that the reason the strike was successful on Anglo mines was because they did not divide senior workers from other workers. They said the reason Goldfields did not go on strike was that they made a clear distinction between supervisory workers and other workers. That is why immediately after the strike Anglo divided the hostels along those lines.

Now senior staff, supervisors and clerks, have their own quarters. So that if ever there is a strike they must be able to use at least part of the workforce. The privileges now of those people are much higher than the rest of the workforce. Management is also reinforcing ethnic lines.

That is why we say we cannot conduct ourselves the same as in 1987. Time and again we have to change strategies. Even if we take action we have to be able to change strategies every day. If we are forced to take action we have to think hard how we will conduct our business.

Labour Bulletin: *You mentioned mistakes made by the union. Can you describe them?*

Motlatsi: Right at the beginning we in the leadership did not plan the timetable of the strike. To be quite honest, we were not aware that the

bosses could dismiss as many as 50,000 workers. We did not plan our response to a mass dismissal. We did not plan how to deal with scab labour. As you know the mines use migrant labour from neighbouring states and homelands. We should have planned in advance what to do if they dismissed.

Labour Bulletin: *What lessons did the union learn from the strike?*

Motlatsi: The strike started as a bread and butter issue, but it became political - political in the sense that it involved sovereign neighbouring states which oppose apartheid. We should have made political consultations with these states. Within the country it should have involved the entire mass democratic movement, so that it could mobilise people in the rural areas and all areas where scabs could come from.

What we underestimated, to be quite honest, was the presence of the Chamber in the neighbouring states, in the TEBA's, in the rural areas. That kind of action needed us to man each and every institution of the enemy.

It suits the bosses to have many experienced mineworkers without work in the rural areas and neighbouring states. Then whenever there is a strike they can easily dismiss workers and find scabs who have experience of the mining industry. Immediately after the dismissals they recruited scabs from KwaZulu, but people of that area have no experience of mining. If they were experienced underground the



A lesson learnt - the 'homelands' provide an easy source of unemployed workers during a strike

Photo: Paul Weinberg/Afrapix

time ago. That was very broad. But discussion started there about how we go about nationalisation. Now we have to work out what we mean by that. How do we go about it? All factors will be looked into, and it is a huge job.

Labour Bulletin: *Do you see the blueprint being negotiated with management now, or only after liberation?*

Motlatsi: It can be put forward for negotiations, but I don't think it will achieve much. It will be useful after apartheid. We have

bosses would have had no problem.

Labour Bulletin: *What is the significance of the resolution on drawing up a blueprint for the mining industry?*

Motlatsi: A lot needs to be done. There are so many ideas on this subject. It is very open. But the resolution mandates the NEC to table a blueprint for the industry at the next congress.

As you know we adopted a resolution on nationalising the mines some

already started to look beyond where we are now, to post-apartheid. It's not an easy task, because no-one knows what will take place. But it is our duty to formulate what we want to happen in future.

Let's not say we are fighting apartheid and that's all. We must be able to make the kind of changes that can benefit the people. We must not be like a dog which chases a bus. When the bus stops the dog also stops, because he does not know what he is doing. ☆