

# Mine violence

By ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

**V**iolent clashes amongst mineworkers are on the increase. At least 41 workers have been killed and scores injured at four mines since the beginning of the year.

Anglo American's Vaal Reefs South shaft 8 was the first to erupt when fighting broke out amongst the 6 000-strong workforce. Twelve workers were killed and at least eight were injured. At Goldfields' Deelkraal mine in Carletonville, workers clashed for three days at the beginning of March. Six workers died and more than 100 were left injured. April saw Primrose mine in Germiston and Vaal Reefs in the Free State erupt in violent clashes. At least nine workers died at Primrose, while 14 were killed at Vaal Reefs shaft 9.

Reasons for these violent clashes vary from mine to mine. However, there are some common features.

## Ethnic conflict

Mine owners have always encouraged, if not enforced, the segregation of workers' accommodation along ethnic lines. In many mines, managements have enforced a system of indunas who exercise a great deal of influence in the hostels. Some indunas reportedly insist that members of their ethnic group join a particular organisation that they favour.

Deelkraal is a case in point. Zulu-speaking indunas reportedly force their fellow Zulus to belong to the IFP-aligned United Mining Workers Union of SA (UMWUSA).

The NUM claims that management prefers to deal with UMWUSA, rather than with the majority representative, NUM. "Induna systems of control have been put in place at Deelkraal and other mines in order to perpetuate divisions amongst workers. Until recently, Deelkraal management has resisted demands to recognise the NUM, despite our representivity at the mine," said the NUM's Archie Palane.

At all the mines, clashes started as personal fights between two workers who happened to be from different ethnic groups.

*briefing*

Other workers then took sides along ethnic lines and the fighting degenerated into intra-ethnic violence.

## Management complicity?

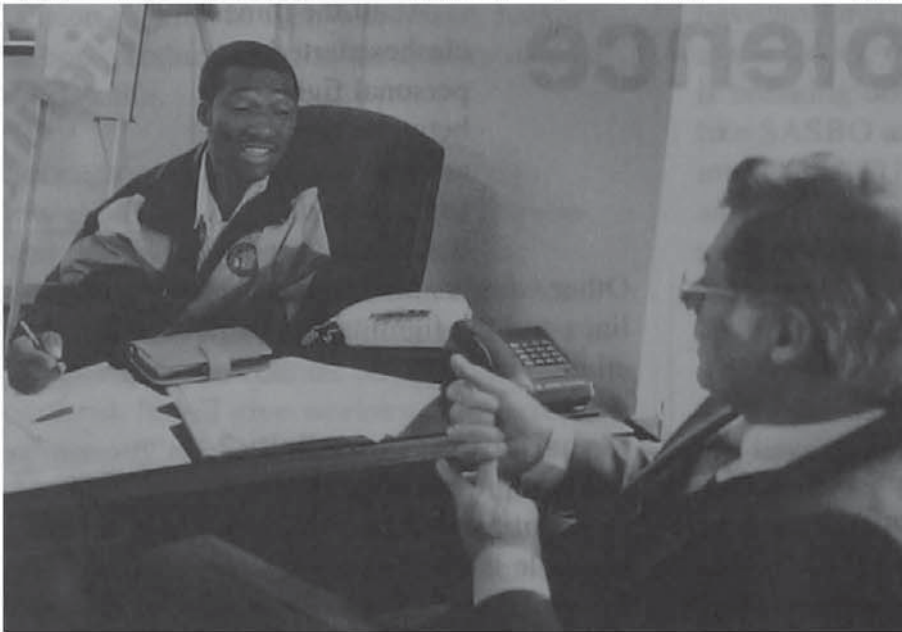
NUM representatives suspect a hidden management hand in the latest violence. A good example is the Primrose mine. At the time of the violence on this mine, the NUM claimed: "This is a marginal mine that has little prospect of surviving for much longer. Management has applied for funding from the government to keep the mine going. We suspect management instigated the violence so that a section of the workers can leave of their own volition, thereby saving management the cost of paying retrenchment packages." Just before Easter, Primrose mine owners applied for the liquidation of the mine, claiming that ethnic violence had ruined the mine's chances of recovery.

## Weapons

The proliferation of weapons at mine hostels is another feature of the violence. Reports from recent clashes indicate that fighting groups were armed with the most deadly weapons, including guns, pangas and spears. The NUM said the violence at Deelkraal, for example, could have been avoided had management heeded the union's plea to stop the stockpiling of weapons at the mine hostels prior to last April's general election. After the violence, police removed weapons filling three five-tonne trucks.

## Xenophobia

Xenophobia is also rearing its ugly head. NUM president James Motlatsi says calls amongst mineworkers for foreign workers to be repatriated are growing disturbingly louder. "Some of our members are now becoming trapped in this attitude. Mineworkers from outside South Africa are under pressure



*Negotiations between NUM and Primrose mine management, April 1995*

from locals to go back home as they are supposedly taking jobs that could otherwise be given to South Africans."

At Primrose, Mozambican workers asked management to pay them out so they could return home as they feared attacks from their Xhosa-speaking colleagues. This was after some Mozambicans had beaten to death a drunken Xhosa-speaking worker who had attacked Shangaan-speaking colleagues.

### Working life

The life of a mineworker in a single sex hostel provides fertile ground for conflicts to develop and explode into violent fights. Most mines have liquor outlets within the premises, where workers drown their frustrations. These include low wages, separation from their families and a lack of recreational facilities.

### Solutions

NUM members are attempting to deal with ethnic violence by rejecting ethnically-segregated hostels. The union says that workers are allocating themselves rooms, rather than sticking to management's ethnically-arranged accommodation.

NUM has also launched an intensive campaign to democratise the running of hostels. This includes abolishing the induna system

and replacing it with elected hostel representatives.

Palane concedes that it is not easy to do away with ethnic tensions. He says the union had targeted some of the leaders for recruitment into the NUM fold "We have had some success, although some workers are still scared to be seen attending NUM meetings when their indunas are not members of our union."

### Migrant labour

The NUM and the trade union movement generally has always called for an end

to the migratory labour system. The NUM is calling for mineworkers who have worked for a certain period on the mines to be granted South African citizenship. Several representations to the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs have been made on this issue.

The union has, however, come up against the stipulation in the law that a migrant must work for an uninterrupted period of time in order to qualify for citizenship. Migrant workers, especially those on the mines, are excluded as they go back home to renew their contracts every year.

### Peace structures

The NUM is setting up peace monitoring structures where violence has occurred. The main function of these structures, according to union sources, is to identify areas of possible conflict and work out ways of neutralising these. It is, however, still too early to determine whether this will have the desired results. One stumbling block is mine management's apparent reluctance to co-operate. "Some mine managements are determined to destabilise the NUM," union sources said.

Motlatsi has also called for the nationalisation of some mining houses. He argued that this will go a long way in addressing some of the conflicts amongst mineworkers. ✪