

# NUM aims to remain 'champ of champs'

The National Union of Mineworkers has taken some bad knocks in membership over the past few years. It however refuses to allow this to weaken the union or shrink its numbers. **Dinga Sikwebu** explains the new strategy to grow union numbers.

If the labour movement was a sports league, then the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) could have easily won the 'champ of champs' title. When unions gathered in Durban in 1985 to launch the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), NUM was the biggest union to affiliate to the new union federation. Twenty years later, the miners are still perched at the top of the Cosatu log with a membership of 298 939. No mean achievement in the context of downscaling in some of mining's sub-sectors.

At a national workshop held in November 2005 that brought together the union's organisers, NUM vowed to remain 'champ of champs'. In a plan developed at the workshop, the union committed itself to grow the union to 400 000

members by 2008. The organising plan developed at the workshop is an attempt to align NUM recruitment initiatives to Cosatu's drive to grow the union federation by 10% per annum and to reach a target of 4-million in 2009. It is also in line with the NUM 10-year plan to make the organisation 'a leading, strong, united and ever-growing revolutionary union'.

According to the head of the union's organising department Frans Baleni, NUM membership has grown slowly since 2003. The meager growth of the last two years does not compensate for the massive losses in membership between 1994 and 2003. In that period, NUM's membership dropped from 310 596 to 279 099. Baleni cited casualisation, outsourcing, decline in some sectors in which the NUM organises, and management's anti-union initiatives as reasons for membership loss in the earlier period and the slow growth of the last two years. "Growing the union to 400 000 members in three years is a realistic and achievable task if one looks at potential for growth in some sectors of the mining industry," says Baleni.

NUM's new recruitment plan targets platinum and construction industries as sites for membership growth. Besides a belief in future booms in both sectors, the union feels that with densities of less than 50% in platinum and construction, there is scope for the union to grow its membership. [See Box on NUM membership.]

Also targeted are layers that traditionally the NUM did not organise in the past. "Historically the NUM has been a union of mine operators. In most mining houses NUM membership is high within the traditional bargaining units but very low when one takes the total workforce. It is for this reason that we are targeting white-collar workers in our recruitment campaign," said Baleni.

To achieve its target, the organising department uses the 'organisational and industry life-cycle analysis'. The analysis is based on Raymond Vernon's 1966 product-cycle concept that delineates stages through which products go. According to the product-cycle concept, any product or commodity goes through the following stages:

- Innovation: This is from inception when owners sink initial investments in the product.
- Growth: This the phase where dividends begin to accrue to shareholders.
- Maturity: In this phase the product becomes standardised and competition begins to intensify.
- Decline: The value of the product begins to decline in this phase.

Using the product-cycle concept, NUM's organising department identified platinum as a growth point and plans to shift resources from traditional sectors such as gold to platinum group metals. But it is not only for changing its organising foci that NUM uses the framework. The organising strategy developed

**NUM MEMBERSHIP**

Sector	No. of employees	Membership	Union density
Gold	196 964	87 027	44%
Platinum	127 672	50 583	40%
Iron ore	5 961	3 704	62%
Copper	4 953	1 100	22%
Diamonds	18 588	5 196	28%
Coal	47 249	11 619	25%
Construction	467 000	56 000	12%
Energy	28 000	10 679	38%
Chrome	5 775	1 951	34%
Manganese	2 459	Not verified	
Sand	4 165	Not verified	
Other minerals	20 821	Not verified	
<b>Total</b>	<b>929 607</b>	<b>227 859</b>	

Source: NUM Head Office

in November 2005 spells out what the tasks are, in each stage of the product-cycle.

The organising strategy sees the innovation stage as a phase where the union will establish industry rules through agreements that spell out workers' rights and fair procedures. During the growth phase the union aims to extract as many benefits and rights for its members as it can. The new organising strategy suggests that organisers should aim to negotiate social plans at this stage and not wait until the industry goes into decline.

The new plan also shows how health and safety become key concerns when products go through decline and when employers return to mine marginal shafts. "The industry life-cycle model allows us to focus on those sectors of the industry where we can make maximum gains. It is through this model that we hope to define tasks for organisers," states the organising plan.

To avoid the fate of previous organising plans that were stillborn, the three-year strategy has tied the 2006-08 recruitment drive to improvement of service to members. The plan has set goals for NUM's units that provide education, legal and social benefits to members. Resources have also been allocated on a sliding scale based on potential recruitment. The union is also looking at incentives for branch leadership and organisers who will have to drive the campaign. One such incentive is to implement a union decision to allocate 10% of subscriptions collected at workplace level to the branch. What this means is that the more members the branch has, the more money it will have for local activities.

In a context where in many

unions, resource allocation is centralised through head offices, NUM's decision to set 10% of subscriptions for branches is significant. In many instances centralised financial controls have acted as a bureaucratic stranglehold on branches. In the case of the NUM, the decision for branches to retain a fraction of income for local use, acts as a counterweight to an agency-shop fee disincentive. Because branches that have agency-shop agreements keep levies from non-union members, there has been less eagerness to bring those who are unorganised into the union fold as the latter serve as a source of income for the NUM workplace unit.

While NUM's new organising plan is full of innovative ideas, its Achilles heel may be widespread subcontracting that is engulfing both the construction and mining sectors. The union needs to build into its organising drive a campaign to deal with subcontracting. According to data from the Department of Minerals and Energy, subcontracted work accounts for roughly 20% of all employment in mining. Insofar as the organising plan does not explicitly target workers who work for subcontractors, NUM's 2006-08 recruitment may not meet its target and objectives.

Another area that the organising plan has to think out carefully is how to factor environmental concerns into its 'organisational and industry life-cycle analysis'. The sectors that the NUM organises in, produce products that not only harm workers but also the environment and communities living around the mines. In the same way that NUM will strive for adherence to fair labour practices in the growth stages of the product-cycle, the union should be in the forefront of ensuring company adherence to environmental codes.

Likewise, the union should not only be concerned with the implementation of social plans when sectors decline, but should negotiate programmes for the rehabilitation of mining sites at once. This rehabilitation could provide livelihoods for NUM members who have been victims of retrenchments.

Lastly, the NUM should consider how to internationalise its organising strategies. This is crucial as South African mining houses display a zealous appetite for diversifying and relocating their production to other countries.

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