

Outraged feelings burst forth

Mineworkers at Vaal Reefs

This is the second part of a three-part series. In the previous *Bulletin* Dunbar Moodie described how a spirit of ungovernability swept through Vaal Reefs with the coming of the National Union of Mineworkers. In this Lira Setona emerged, a charismatic mine leader who conflicted with union strategy which ultimately led to the dismissal of 14 000 miners. Here Moodie analyses how a wave of unexpressed feeling burst forth and forced the NUM to change its tactics.

Raymond Williams, the British Marxist literary critic who himself grew up working class in Wales, always insisted on the importance of “structures of feeling” or elements of social experience that precede the emergence of social movements, “social experiences *in solution*” as he put it. Williams is referring here, I think to anger, moral outrage and despair that are intensely experienced by people who have not yet, and sometimes never will, mobilise collective action.

Structures of feeling arise in intolerable institutional situations that the participants believe cannot be changed.

The characteristics of ‘structures of feeling’ according to Williams “are often more recognizable at a later stage, after they have been formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations.” The emotional underpinnings of social movement organisations, for Williams, thus pre-exist organisation in common individual experiences. This makes possible organisational mobilising power.

GROWTH OF EDUCATED MINER

In an evocative thesis submitted for an undergraduate degree at the

National University of Lesotho in 1976, Palesa Sebilo gives an account of Basotho migrant structures of feeling, titled “What do the miners say?” On the basis of interviews, she makes a distinction between three different categories of migrant workers: uneducated miners, semi-educated miners and educated miners.

“Uneducated miners” were either illiterate or had completed only the lowest grades. Such men were traditionalists who migrated to support their commitment to a rural way of life. At this time in Lesotho, mine work was virtually the only option for male wage labour.

“Semi-educated miners” had an elementary education through to about Standard 6 (Grade 8). They had often broken with ‘customs and tradition’ and were deeply estranged from both rural Sesotho existence and from the mine work they were forced to do. For these men too, mine work was their only option.

“Educated miners” had completed their Junior Certificates (Grade 10) or matriculated from high school.

Sebilo’s categories apply more widely than to Basotho, I believe. For traditionalist young men in labour supply areas throughout southern Africa, migration to the mines had

become an extension of male initiation rituals. Palesa Sebilo quotes an old Mosotho man who started working on the mines in 1937, who said: “Although we had a lot of animals, I could not stay at home like women. It was unheard of for a young man to relax at home and look after cattle like a little boy or his old father. All young men went to the mines. I did not care for any trying conditions of the mines. After all, ‘a baby boy is born to be eaten by vultures’ in his struggle for survival, even if it could be at the expense of his life.”

Sebilo’s “semi-educated” miners were much stronger in their expression of dissatisfaction. More wage-dependent, their concern was about pay and the self-respect decent wages might bring. They were much more politically-minded than the traditionalists, even revolutionary. Racial resentments cut deep. In the words of one of them: “We are handled like unthinking animals... We are not regarded as people that bring such wealth to South Africa. The most painful part of it is the knowledge that the very man standing by you and pointing with his finger where you should dig, gets a salary that quintuplicates yours. Yet he does not recognise your job as important to

him... And this act they put up to make us feel that we are pests that trouble them in their country is nerve wracking and intolerable.”

For these men, mine migration brought no promise of redemptive release in a rural future.

In 1970, over 70% of black mineworkers at the South African gold mines came from outside the country. When mine wages started to rise in 1972 and to attract better educated labour from South Africa itself, the numbers of Sebilo's second type of worker increased greatly.

It was not so much that traditional standards dissolved overnight. Such standards had long been eroding in the countryside as underdevelopment and apartheid resettlement took their toll. On the mines, the change came fast because the composition of the labour-force changed radically in a short time – by 1980, over 70% of mine labour was South African. These new men stood ready to challenge not only the wages paid, but also the entire moral authority of the old order on the mines. Racial humiliation was experienced with new intensity by the ‘new workers’.

NUM AS SAVIOUR

Sebilo's work enables us to see an emerging structure of feeling on the mines that helps us understand the meteoric rise of the National Union of Mineworkers

Migrant workers densely packed together in mine compounds felt excluded from access to any redemption or salvation that might confirm their self-respect and integrity and enable them to transcend the unpredictability of their dangerous jobs and the desperate poverty of their distant families.

Some see this type of situation as the first phase of a millenarian (belief by a movement in a coming dramatic destruction and transformation of society, after which all things will be



Dismissed Vaal Reefs miners return home.

changed). Not all potentially millenarian situations have millenarian outcomes. Nonetheless, I suggest that ordinary members of the NUM when it was established on the mines in 1982, sometimes couched their demands in millenarian terms. Lira Setona's militancy gave voice to such demands. For many of its grassroots members the union promised renewed integrity. Like a millenarian movement, the union appealed to a revitalised structure of feeling that would be made anew in a new order.

Let me be clear here. The NUM is not and never was a millenarian movement. It did, however, originate in structures of feeling which cried out for new patterns of redemption, and to an important extent it delivered new patterns for its members.

When the union was formed by Cyril Ramaphosa late in 1982, he undertook the task at the request of Cusa (Council of Unions of South Africa), the black consciousness trade union federation. He himself had been jailed for his leadership in Cosas (Congress of South African Students), the black consciousness

student union at Turfloop, inspired by black theology. He had earlier been involved in an evangelical Christian outreach organisation.

Ramaphosa saw his leadership of the union as “a quest to drink from the cup of what I saw as the most oppressed... part of this apartheid edifice,” he told me. There was a sense in which Ramaphosa with his zeal for human dignity and the alienated structure of feeling of the ‘new workers’ on the mines were made for one another. But Ramaphosa was no millenarian and never set himself forward as a prophet. He was a lawyer, possessed of extraordinary energy and organisational skills and determined to found a union with deep local roots and a professional and incorruptible central administration.

THE UNION GREW LIKE WILDFIRE

In 1984, wage negotiations stalled and the union called a strike. The Chamber of Mines made a last-minute offer and the strike was called off. By then, however, 50 000 workers were already out. Union officials worked through several nights in a row, to



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talk workers back. Workers remained unhappy and many 'educated' early representatives found themselves voted out of office.

Also the strength of the strike turnout persuaded management that they had to take the union seriously and managers started to put pressure on black administrative staff on the mines who were also union representatives. Many resigned from the union. Workers responded by simply choosing shaft stewards from their own ranks. At once underlying structures of feeling became shared understandings. Workers came forward with a myriad of grievances. Many centered on the experience of racism.

At the NUM annual congress in January 1985, a new strategy emerged, incorporating insights from structures of feeling about racial humiliation. On 6 May 1985, Ramaphosa gave a public lecture at the South African Institute of Race Relations announcing a drastic change in NUM strategy that had taken place at the beginning of the year.

The NUM, he said, had been "trying to make fundamental change in a system using structures and instruments that were designed to perpetuate the system". For the first three years of the union, they had organised around issues like safety, wages and working-class unity. Since the 1984 strike, however, democratically elected shaft stewards

had urged the union to embark on more general resistance to white control both at the point of production and in the migrant hostels. Resistance to racial exploitation and thoughtless authoritarianism had become the basis of the NUM's new organising strategy, Ramaphosa said.

Ramaphosa was careful to insist that the new strategy derived directly from meetings of union shaft stewards. Instead of relying purely on strike threats, Ramaphosa said, they had decided to adopt new tactics. Besides fighting back physically against all assaults by white supervisors underground, shaft stewards were resolved to attack the 'induna system' in the compounds and the 'piccanin system' underground.

Shaft stewards refused to give white miners preference in queues when they were waiting to be hoisted. They were also determined that whites would not use black workers for charging up (laying explosives) without extra pay. Thus, at the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985, rank and file shaft stewards steered the growing union into a general popular struggle against racist and authoritarian white control at work and in the migrant hostels.

Vaal Reefs South was at the crest of this new movement. Leaders of the NUM found themselves surfing a mighty wave of collective racial

resentment, and trying to govern the workers' thrust towards ungovernability.

CONCLUSION

Individual experiences that made up the structure of feeling so well described by, and to, Sebilo 10 years before, now burst forth into a social movement union fueled by intense moral outrage. In this regard, Setona was as much a symptom as a cause. But on the mines ungovernability led to mass dismissals and disaster for the NUM on Vaal Reefs South.

We may leave the last word from the union point of view on the 1985 dismissals to Oliver Sokanyile, the first NUM regional chairperson in the Vaal Reefs region, who said to me: "No. 8 and No. 9 followed Lira and they learned a lesson. Lira never came back and No. 8 and No. 9 became weak again". LB

In Part 3 in the next volume of Labour Bulletin Dunbar Moodie evaluates the significance of the workers' move toward ungovernability for the union and employers at Vaal Reefs South.

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