



Black Allied Mining and Construction Workers Union (BAMCWU)

The independent trade union movement in South Africa has grown rapidly since the early 1970's. Recent debates such as those around registration have given the movement clearer direction. In the trade union movement, as in other organisations of the oppressed, greater unity is being forged. On the one hand there is the by now well known unity talks between the larger trade union groupings such as FOSATU, GMU, CUSA.

But there is also growing unity among the smaller unions. A few months ago 6 independent unions all sharing a mainly Black Consciousness position formed an alliance. The Black Allied Mining and Construction Workers Union (BAMCWU), involved in the recent Penge asbestos mine strike in Northern Transvaal is one of them. Vuka spoke to Pandelani Nefolovidwe, BAMCWU's general-secretary.

ASBESTOS MINE STRIKE

BAMCWU was involved in the recent Penge asbestos mine strike where 1,700 workers lost their jobs. The strike centred around demands for higher wages and recognition of the Union. When their demands were not met, workers chose the certainty of starvation and hardship in Lebowa, rather than accept the mine's offer of re-employment at lower pay. They remained committed to their union throughout.

BAMCWU now intends carrying out an independent study into the

effects of asbestos on workers.

Very little has been written about this union which was born of a strike two years ago. Its first newsletter, Mosebetsi/Umsebenzi was banned for distribution and possession.

AZAPO

With only a tiny percentage of miners organised, BAMCWU believes there is organising space for it in an area already involving NUM, SAAWU and UMMAWOSA. Workers, they say, must themselves decide which union best represents their interests. While AZAPO members have been involved in the union from its formation, and the union shares much of AZAPO's politics, it stresses that it is an autonomous organisation.

BAMCWU was born of a strike by about 500 workers at Pioneer Ready Mix Concrete. During the strike, workers turned for advice to Letsatsi Mosala, then AZAPO's labour secretary. After the strike they felt it necessary to form a permanent structure to defend the interests of construction workers. BAMCWU emerged in June 1982 after a meeting between the workers and AZAPO members involved in labour issues. Today Letsatsi Mosala is the president of the union which organises in the cementation,

mining, building and related industries.

From its small beginnings in 1982, membership has grown to around 20,000, and it is still growing rapidly. Union officials say about 400 workers come to the office every week to sign up. Presently there is no special emphasis on organising in the gold and coal mines, although this is the aim. BAMCWU has access to the mines but has yet to conclude recognition agreements with the Chamber of Mines.

Pandelani Nefolovidwe, BAMCWU's general secretary, said the union believes strongly that worker issues on the factory floor and those of the community are integrally linked. "There is nothing which leads us to believe that the life of a worker at work and his life at home must be separated. This does not mean we don't see a distinction between problems at work and in the community. But we believe in looking at the life of a Black worker in totality. We look at it in terms of the struggle against exploitation and oppression." We believe the Black workers' struggle must be tied to the broad political struggle. And our perspective of the





AZANIAN MANIFESTO

struggle is that of the Manifesto of the Azanian People, adopted at this year's National Forum. "The struggle is not for reform but for transformation. That is why the trade union struggle is not enough. Trade unions need the principled leadership of a viable political organisation.

In line with their agreement with the principles of the Azanian Manifesto, Nef says they also emphasise self-reliance and independence of Black worker organisations. "This self-reliance is expressed at all levels and is only possible if genuine worker democracy exists." "The Black working class is the leading force in our struggle. This is why they must make the decisions, not the union officials. Organisationally the striving for self-reliance has shown itself in the principled refusal to register. "At our congress this year," says Nef, "we decided not to register because we see registration as an inroad into unions by the ruling class and state."

Recognition agreements are seen in a similar light. "They are agreements between workers and bosses. Such agreements can't be upheld in the long term. Real change in the interests of Black workers can't be won within the limits of

labour laws. We regard these agreements as tactical measures to be used when necessary but not to be over-emphasised. "Ideologically self-reliance is encouraged by barring whites from membership of the union. "No one can deny that there may be committed whites. Some may even be committed to the Azanian Manifesto. But we must distinguish between their commitment and their role. We believe they should prepare the people in the areas where they live for social change. Why do they want to organise Blacks and Black workers? Blacks and Black workers are capable of organising themselves for liberation." We adopt this position because of the objective reality of South Africa, not anti-whitism.

UNITY TALKS

Blacks for us include all those who are by law or tradition discriminated against in the South African society and who identify as a unit against oppression and exploitation.

On a wider scale, BAMCWU has tried to assist in building independence of Black worker organisations. While it was excluded from the unity talks initiated by

FOSATU and the other large trade union groupings, it has been party to an alliance of six independent unregistered unions. "To this day we don't know why we were excluded from the unity talks. But we also realise the need for self-reliance that this can only be reached by uniting unions with similar ideals. This is why we formed the alliance. But we'd still welcome talks geared to wider unity.

STATE REPRESSION

"In the future the independent Black trade unions are sure to face increased state harassment. But this does not deter us at all"

BAMCWU was also involved in the strike by about 10,000 workers at Rand Mines Durban Deep near Roodepoort. Police were called in and at least 111 workers were injured. 25 were treated in hospital.

BAMCWU says that the number of injured is much higher and that some workers were sent back to the bantustans without receiving any benefits. Other workers were forced to work at gunpoint. Mine managers denied this. They said that armed policemen at the mine had come to protect those who had wanted to report for work.



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AND WITH PICKS IN THEIR HANDS TURN INTO MALLETS OF JUSTICE. THEY MUST