

IMPALA PLATINUM: NO EASY ROAD TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING



Labour Bulletin writer SNUKI ZIKALALA reports

While some companies move towards worker participation, at many workplaces workers still face a harsh and repressive regime. The struggle of Impala mineworkers for basic rights demonstrates this clearly.

Summer came in July for the Impala Platinum complex of mines in Bophuthatswana - with a hot wave of strikes by 40 000 workers demanding higher wages and union recognition.

Initially workers forced management to negotiate a new wage agreement, recognise workers' committees at all plants, and agree in principle to path-breaking recognition of the National Union of Mineworkers.

During the latter part of the year, however, management attempted to roll back these gains. There were mass dismissals, meetings were banned from the hostel premises, marshals were forcibly removed from hostels, and key worker leaders were dismissed, detained by Bop police and tortured.

This led to a new wave of strikes. Impala employees were tear-gassed, dismissed and arrested. A mine manager was assaulted, Impala buildings and buses were burnt, managers' cars were stoned, and a recruiting office of Bophuthatswana National Union of Mine employees (BONUME) was destroyed.

The strike action was remarkable, in that it was initiated by worker activists organising on their own. NUM had virtually no members and extremely tenuous links with the workforce. However, the union was able to take advantage of the space opened up by the strike, gain access, and sign up 30 000 workers within a few weeks.

For NUM, building a base in platinum was crucial. The union had already decided to target this as an economically

powerful sector, where more advanced rights could be won and then extended to mines in the struggling gold sector. In its initial bargaining thrust at Impala, it forced management to agree in principle to an 'agency shop' (a form of closed shop) - a major breakthrough in the mining sector - and to full time shopstewards.

However, management counter-attacked, and by the end of the year an agreement had still not been signed. The union was unable to consolidate its membership and structures, and tensions emerged among the workers.

Management, however, has been unable to regain control. By January 1992, Impala - the world's second largest platinum producer - was reported to have lost more than R100m in lost production - and strikes continued.

Impala is situated in the highly repressive bantustan of Bophuthatswana. South African unions are barred from the bantustan, and its dictator Mangope has refused to sign the CODESA declaration on a democratic SA, insisting that Bophuthatswana will remain an 'independent country'. The mass organisation of miners into a militant union will threaten his rule, and could serve as a focal point of resistance.

Impala management has hidden behind the Mangope regime, refusing to recognise NUM. In 1986, 30 000 Impala workers were dismissed for striking over recognition of the union. Now, however, the writing is on the wall - both for management and Mangope.

1. Underground organising and mass anger

The spark that led to a series of go-slows at Impala platinum, was an 8% wage increase negotiated by management and the BONUME. BONUME is a registered union in Bophuthatswana, and had some 3 000 members at Impala.

The wage increase was granted on 1 July. "On 3 July, Bafokeng South met spontaneously at the bar," says William Lencoe.

Lencoe is a worker representative and a former member of BONUME. Bafokeng South is one of the four mines in the Impala complex.

"The topic was the wage agreement signed by BONUME. Anger was written on their faces as they discussed and debated the low wage increase. The discussion was started by three people who were later joined by the majority in the bar.

"That day workers talked openly"

"Despite the fact that there was fear in the mines, that day workers talked openly about their grievances. Everybody was just shouting, taking out his anger not only on BONUME and the management but also against the Bophuthatswana government. Workers were very bitter."

Workers first wanted to march straight to management's offices, but after

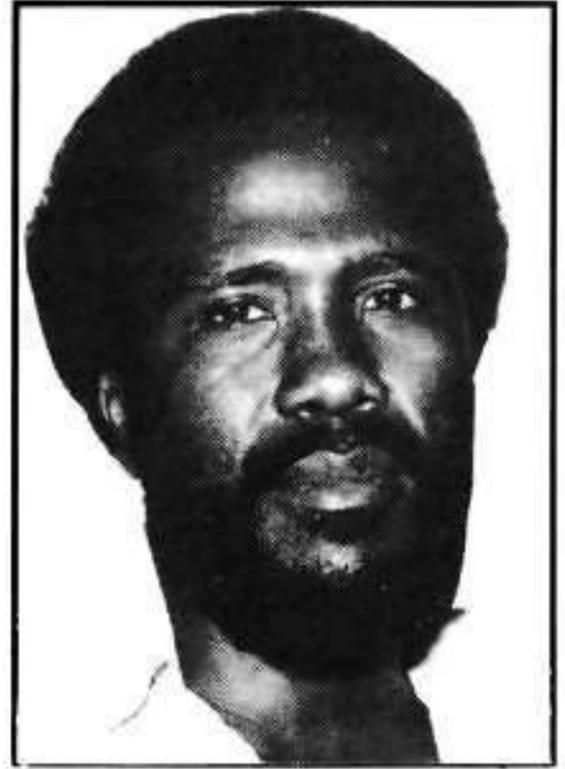
discussion decided to organise a meeting at the stadium, although it was illegal. "Workers left the bar for the stadium singing revolutionary songs. T-shirts of the ANC, NUM and the SACP - which were banned at the mine - appeared from nowhere."

More than 7 000 workers assembled. "We had no organisational structures nor a chairman for the meeting. Platform was given to any eloquent speaker who wanted to express himself. The meeting went on till the early hours of the morning."

The meeting elected 10 representatives as a Workers' Committee to meet management the following day. Management refused to listen to their request for a wage increment, and offered incentive bonuses instead.

In response, the Bafokeng South committee decided to organise a go-slow strike. On 5 July more than 8 000 workers at the mine staged a go-slow. Impala was forced to shut down the mine for a day.

Organising underground Workers at the other Impala mines were galvanised by this action. The complex consists of 13 shafts divided into four mines - Wildebeestfontein North and South, and Bafokeng North and South. The shafts cover an area with a diameter of about 20 km. Worker activists had been organising clandestinely for some years in the name of NUM.



Siphoshe Shabangu: always worked in secret, now on the run

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

One, Siphoshe Shabangu, had been organising underground at Wildebeestfontein North for NUM since 1989. "Before the introduction of the wage increase, I had already formed a committee of five in the compounds. We moved from one plant to the other organising workers. There was absolute secrecy about our work. We did not want to expose ourselves to the management and mine security before we could spread our wings at Impala mines."

Another, Isaac Mayoyo at Bafokeng North, was one of the workers dismissed in the 1986 strike. When he was re-employed he vowed that he would never let workers go on strike without proper preparations.

"The strike of 1986 ended in disaster, but it taught workers to understand what the strength of the employer was like and what their strength was as well. It op-

ened our eyes to the nature of the Bophuthatswana government and its repressive labour laws. It also taught us that unity is strength."

On his return to the mine, Mayoyo started forming cells. "I spoke to workers individually, telling them about NUM and its achievements in South African mines. Within six months I had a number of people who were prepared to help in organising for NUM." This work was helped by workers who had been transferred from other mines in SA, who knew about NUM. These activists now saw their chance.

Hoping to pre-empt the strike from spreading, management convened a meeting with the Workers' Council, which was a "toothless body" formed by management, according to Sipho Shabanga. He had joined the Council so that he "could be able to manoeuvre inside the mine".

The Workers' Council was instructed to persuade workers not to embark on industrial action and that the wage agreement reached with BONUME was all that management could offer.

The Workers' Council requested permission to hold public meetings and convey management's message. This was granted, but only 250 people attended the meeting at Wildebeestfontein North, since they knew it had been called on behalf of management.

Workers demanded full representation and rejected

all structures which were created by management.

Go slow!

After the meeting, says Shabanga, "we moved swiftly and planned mass action.

The response was great." Workers prepared for a joint go-slow strike with the other mines scheduled for 14 July.

Meanwhile, at Bafokeng North workers gained courage from the work stoppage by Bafokeng South workers. "The wage increment was a blessing," according to Mayoyo. "We exploited workers' discontent and organised for the go-slow strike." Bafokeng North elected a committee of 10 at a mass meeting. Secret meetings were held with representatives from the other mines and prepared for the go-slow. Mass meetings were held in the stadium of each mine.

On 14 July, more than 30 000 workers from the four mines launched a four-hour go-slow.

"Workers were elated by the strike. White miners could not cope, and mine wagons were piling up empty. Workers saw that they had power to paralyse the whole production process. About 75 percent of Impala's production was affected," said Mayoyo.

First negotiations

This action forced management to meet with workers' representatives, on 16 July. "Management's attitude had changed. Aggressiveness and

threats which were the order of the day from management's side, were not heard. They were polite and "concerned" about stoppage of production and safety," Mayoyo observed.

"There was tension in the board room. We were on one side with our dirty smelling clothes and management with its white perfumed shirts. It was such a contrast. We were the ones who were now arrogant and confident of our position."

Workers demanded an increase of R62 per shift and the recognition of NUM, while management offered 77c. There are 26 shifts for both surface and underground workers who are paid daily and 30 shifts for monthly paid workers.

Management promised to consider workers' demands, provided that workers could secure normal production and stability in the mines. Management "appealed that we should re-organise ourselves as we came with different demands and were not speaking with one voice." Management also stated that it could not recognise NUM, as it did not conform to the requirements of Bophuthatswana labour law.

"The first meeting with management had its shocks. Workers were not well organised and their demands were haphazard. They had no prepared agenda and the language was a barrier as some members of the committee don't have even elementary

education," says Mayoyo.

Report-back meetings were organised in the four mines and the mineral processing plant. "Workers wanted pressure to be exerted on management through go-slows and ultimately a general strike."

On 29 July, the committees from all five workplaces met and combined to form a Workers' Committee. The first round of negotiations with workers as a solid force started on 2 August. They demanded an increase of R62 per shift. Their aim was to push the minimum rate to R800 a month.

Sipho Shabangu describes the first talks on wages as being "very difficult". "Management was using the law and the skill of negotiating. They drove negotiations into more technical and complex levels. Lack of experience and little knowledge, put us at a disadvantage.

"We were very firm on our demands, knowing that we had the backing of 40 000 workers. What frustrated me was that I have very little knowledge of English and at times failed to follow or understand arguments, especially when management used percentages."

Negotiations continued over the next few days. By the 12th the workers had reduced their demand to R20 across-the-board increase per shift, while management went up to R1,30. There was no shift on the following day. "Management was very stubborn," according to workers.

Second stoppage ...and massacre

The Workers' Committee decided to take industrial action, and recommended a four hour work stoppage. On 14 August, mass meetings were organised. The following day "we had 100 percent support for the four-hour stoppage at Bafokeng North and Wildebeestfontein North and South".

Management had not been informed beforehand and walked out of the negotiations in protest.

On 16 August, a group of workers who were coming out of the dining hall were attacked by unknown assailants. In the melee 11 people were killed and 26 injured. Worker leaders rejected management's claim that this was a tribal clash, pointing out that activists were targeted and that the attackers were men not known on the mine. Some allege that "management's hand was involved in the massacre" because of workers' strike action.

After the violence, it was tense at the mines.

2. The union gains access

At this stage the union became involved. Management asked the NUM regional office in Rustenburg to send experienced negotiators to assist the workers' committee. NUM had already approached the head office of Genmin, which owns Impala, in Johannesburg. "We told

them that they had to deal with NUM and, if they wanted us to address their problems, they had to give us access to the mine," said Marcel Golding, NUM's assistant general secretary.

A strategic sector

The union had already decided to launch a concerted organising drive in the platinum sector: "The new area of growth in our union is the platinum industry. We have to re-focus our strategic orientation to growth points for the union, to plan for the 21st century," said Golding.

Platinum is an economically growing sector, and if the union can establish a base there "it will strengthen our capacity to assist sectors which are ailing," such as gold. "If you can hit the mining companies where they are financially strong, your position is stronger."

But NUM was not yet properly organised in the area. "When the whole thing erupted, we were still discussing the question of organising other areas around Rustenburg. Impala Platinum is an important site for the future. It has almost 42 000 workers. It is likely to expand in employment if we do things correctly. It is also critical if one is going to defeat the homeland."

Management agreed to let the union address a mass rally of all Impala workers. On 22 August, NUM president James Motlatsi spoke to more than 40 000 workers. Union organisers used the

rally to launch a massive membership drive. Five days later NUM submitted 24 599 subscription forms to the company, and a month later another 4 000.

"When they gave us access we turned the entire situation around and organised the mine. We moved from nothing in July, and by August we were representing about 30 000 workers.

"We saw an opening and we took it. We put a lot of resources into it, on the ground and negotiating at head office level, to create the necessary space," according to Golding.



NUM and negotiations

Union head office officials Jessie Maluleka and Martin Nicol started to assist the Impala workers committee in negotiations. "It started off with our having a window," says Golding. "We could look in and watch the negotiations but we could not participate."

But the workers "wore management down" by asking to caucus with the union officials every time a fresh point was raised. Eventually management agreed that the officials could join



Marcel Golding (centre) talks to workers at Impala

Photo: Snuki Zikalala/Labour Bulletin

the workers' negotiating team, and "the union was recognised de facto".

According to workers, the arrival of NUM officials helped the committee a lot. Tactics on negotiations improved and the demands became realistic. They learnt how to deal with percentages. "The Committee is maturing. Now they can get involved in discussions without being angry or emotional," according to NUM's Maluleka.

On 11 September there was a general meeting at Bafokeng South to report back on progress in the negotiations. Marcel Golding and the president of COSATU, John Gomomo, addressed them. *Labour Bulletin* too was present. As we entered the stadium there was a roar of applause from the miners. They chanted slogans: "Viva COSATU, Viva ANC, Viva SACP, Viva *Bulletin*!"

The mood was jovial and exciting. Workers wearing T-shirts with emblems of the

ANC, SACP and COSATU were singing and *toyi-toying*. There was a roar of applause when Golding reported that workers would win an average increase of 15%.

Wage settlement

Finally, on 23 September a settlement was reached. Management agreed to an increase of 17%, and that the agreement would be signed before 25 September.

Tension increased as management delayed the signing. Under pressure from the workers the committee organised a demonstration at the head office of Genmin in Johannesburg. Golding was called and an agreement was signed in the early hours of the morning.

"The wage agreement was a total victory. We knew that we had won workers on our side and now we had to fight for the recognition of NUM," says Mayoyo.

While some of the workers were still celebrating their victory, violence



Strike meeting at Wildebeesfontein North

Photo: Robert Gumpert

erupted at Bafokeng North. Eleven people were killed in a fight apparently started by dagga-dealers.

3. Management counter-attacks

At the beginning of October tension emerged between individuals on the workers' committee at Wildebeestfontein North. The tension centred on a dispute between Steve Joseph Makalela and Siphoshe Shabangu about the disappearance of money collected for a funeral. The dispute led to an underground sit-in, heightened tension between workers, and the closing down of the mines. Management went on the offensive against workers and there were dismissals, teargassing and riots. Bophu-

thatswana police detained and tortured worker activists. From October until the end of the year Impala was the scene of ongoing confrontation, stoppages and shutdowns.

Management appears to have tried to use this period to roll back the gains made by the union. As Golding saw it in November, "Things developed so fast that management did not know what was happening. We just drove the process to a point where a range of agreements that they reached in principle with us were way ahead of what we have at the gold mines. When they took stock they realised what had happened, and now they are trying to roll back.

"We are trying to defend what we did in a short space

of time. We got access, we organised 30 000 in 6 weeks, we got them to agree to full time shop stewards and an agency shop - the first in the mining industry. It's a critical breakthrough. Now when they realise the implications, they are trying to push it back and say we did not mean quite this, and did not mean quite that.

"They are now trying to re-assert their control and authority on the mines. They are now saying: look we are dismissing these guys, we are going to teach you a lesson."

"Power struggle"

From October events took the following course:

- One of the two protagonists on the Wildebeestfontein North committee,

Steve Makalela, was summoned to a disciplinary hearing for absenting himself from work. The hearing was adjourned to 15 October. After the hearing, Makalela accused the workers' committee of working with management and refused to attend the next hearing.

- On 15 October Makalela called a meeting of 8 000 workers at the mine, while committee members were attending a shop stewards training course. He attacked committee members verbally. The meeting decided to stage an underground sit-in to defend Makalela against dismissal.
- On 16 October, more than 7 000 workers at Wildebeestfontein North staged a sit-in on night shift. Management dispatched a car to Rustenburg to fetch the committee members and NUM regional secretary Titi Mtenjane. The NUM delegation went underground at 9pm and spent 3 hours persuading workers to leave the shafts. "We had to be very tactful and apply diplomacy. Workers were very hostile, having been told we were collaborating with management," says Mtenjane. After this action, management announced it was closing Wildebeestfontein North for eleven days, and added that it might close one or more shafts permanently as labour unrest and a weak platinum price

threatened the mines profitability.

- On 17 October 8 000 workers packed into the main hall at Wildebeestfontein North, while NUM officials and the workers' committee held an urgent meeting next door to try to sort out the divisions. The situation was explosive. The workers' committee and NUM officials decided Makalela had almost destroyed the gains made by unions and workers, but for "unity's sake" the different parties in the committee were asked to put personal differences aside. They decided once again to request management to open the mine.
- According to members of the workers' committee, the situation at Impala was becoming very tense. "Workers were worried about their jobs, having heard that management was considering closing the mine permanently." Workers from Wildebeestfontein South who were not affected by the closure were becoming anxious, since some workers from Wildebeestfontein North were staying with them. Those who were affected by the closure at Wildebeestfontein North were not happy that others were working, and tried to urge workers to stage solidarity action with them. "We saw what was coming and knew that this was going to divide us and de-

stroy what we had been building for the past five years."

Management puts on pressure

- Eventually management agreed to meet workers on 20 October. At the meeting management agreed to open Wildebeestfontein North on 23 October. On the set date, nothing happened. The hostels were tense.
- Management was approached again, and agreed that Wildebeestfontein North 10 Shaft and certain gangs at 2 A Shaft would commence normal operations on 26 October. The other shafts would start operations only on the the 27th.
- Those who reported for the early morning shift at Wildebeestfontein North on 26 October were frisked and detained. Marshals who had played an active part in the 16 October sit-in were served with notices of dismissals from the mine. Siphso Shabangu describes what happened: "To my surprise the whole area was blockaded by mine security police and the known marshals and members of the committee were picked up one by one. I tried to intervene and was told by a representative of the mine manager that I had no right to be there, and that the days of the committee were over." "I was arrested and de-

tained in a dog training camp. Inside the camp there were about 38 marshals." Later in the day, three hippos escorted Shabangu out of the hostel and dumped him in Rustenburg.

But mine security did not only act against workers at Wildebeestfontein North. They arrested marshals from Wildebeestfontein South who were going to work on 26 October.

"I thought that the security police had gone berserk. They started teargassing all the workers randomly. They went to Bafokeng North and South and teargassed workers without any provocation. Workers retaliated by burning the bar and stoning cars."

- The following day management agreed that workers could go back to work. But as workers were about to board the buses going to work, they were encircled by hippos which started firing teargas at them. Workers retaliated by burning the welfare offices, sports-shops and safety stores. Marshals and members of the committee were loaded into vehicles at gunpoint by mine security.

In the ensuing riot, Bodiredi shopping complex, the First Aid hall and company stores were brought down with fire. Mine security barracks

were attacked. Committee member William Lencoe commented that "management was using Bop security police to try to destroy us".

Third strike

- The committee met under these difficult conditions and organised the third co-ordinated strike action at the Impala complex. "On 28 October more than 35 000 workers at the four mines and mineral processing stayed away." On that day a Bafokeng North mine manager was assaulted by angry miners when he confronted them. According to Mayoyo, "He thought that as a mine manager of Bafokeng North, workers were still afraid of him. He went to confront angry workers who had been teargassed and shot at with rubber bullets in totally unprovoked incidents. Workers coaxed him to enter their complex. When he entered the mine, he spoke to them as if they were children. This infuriated them and they attacked him." The manager was saved by one of the committee members.
- Management closed Wildebeestfontein North and Bafokeng North mines. Workers at Wildebeestfontein South, Bafokeng South and the mineral processes plant absented themselves in sympathy. NUM officials called by management to assist

were arrested by Bop police, and later released.

The mines open

- At a later meeting management agreed to open the mines and asked for union assistance in getting workers back to work. They also agreed that everyone dismissed without proper hearings could appeal and be represented by a committee member. Hearings would begin after five days of normal production. Re-instated workers would receive back-pay. "This was a breakthrough for us," commented NUM's regional secretary. NUM also brought a habeas corpus application and got its members who had been arrested by Bop police released.
- Once production was back to normal, management and the workers' committee agreed in principle that both parties would work towards a Recognition Agreement creating the necessary structures satisfactory to both parties. Both parties agreed to look into the issue of stop orders as a matter of urgency. White mineworker and member of the workers committee, Louis Vosloo, says this was one of the most constructive meetings they had held with management. "They are for the idea that a recognition agreement be signed as soon as possible, but it has

to be done in accordance with Chapter V of the Bop legislation. I was impressed by their attitude." The union had already accepted that it would have to comply with Chapter V so the company could not refuse recognition. Marcel Golding says this meant that the Impala workers would have a head office, there would be separate accounts, and that there would be Tswana-speaking representatives. At the same time, the union would interact with committees in Bophuthatswana, and structures would be integrated. This movement towards recognition was a breakthrough for Impala workers.

- However, on 30 October violence erupted again at Wildebeestfontein North mine, as workers protested against the dismissal of Steve Makalela, the activist whose disciplinary hearing had sparked off the earlier underground sit-in.

Arrest and torture

- Before the dust settled management acted against the marshals. On 5 and 7 November Workers Committee members were raided at their hostels and taken to BOP police by force where they were allegedly tortured. Isaac Mayoyo claims that he was arrested and handed over to the Bophuthatswana police by one

of the manpower managers at Impala [*Labour Bulletin* is in possession of his name].

"On 8 November I was taken to Phokeng police station and tortured. Eight security men beat me with batons. My head was covered with a bag and was pushed into a bath full of water. An electric wire was pushed into my anus. It was so painful. My whole body started to shake as if I had fits.

"In that dazed and painful state, they asked me to work for them and demanded information as to how I organised workers to join NUM. They also wanted to know names of people who are distributing the *Labour Bulletin* in Rustenburg.

"Later on I was taken to Mangope's offices. Mangope questioned me about my activities at Impala. He wanted to know why I had dissuaded workers from joining BONUME. He asked me to leave Bophuthatswana and settle somewhere in the Transkei or South Africa. I refused, saying that I am a Motswana. He then offered R20 000 if I would become a loyal informer.

I was then released on 21 November. Those were the most traumatic days in my life. I never thought that I would get out of detention alive."

Vosloo was also detained at the mine premises. He

was released the following day after paying R200 fine.

"I was questioned by five security police. They wanted to know about my activities at the mine. They kept on telling me that I was employed by the ANC to recruit for them. They started threatening me saying that I will shit if I don't tell the truth about myself. I became very angry. I took off my watch and said that if you touch me one of you will be dead before you do anything to me. That was at about 4 am on Friday morning. I was so tired and my eyes were sore."

Since then Vosloo has been on the run with his family (see box on p 37).

Resistance

- The arrest of more than 25 senior members of the Workers' Committee did not break the backbone of NUM at Impala. Some members managed to escape and reorganised themselves for a major showdown with management.

One such activist, Tsietsie Mohulatsi tells his story: "My comrades came to tip me off about the arrests and I was hidden within the mine premises. First I had to find out who had been arrested. We heard that some had been beaten beyond recognition, and that management was not going to stop arresting and

harassing activists. We decided to take mass action against Impala. "I made contact with workers who were very active throughout the previous six months. They agreed to be co-opted onto the Workers' Committee. "We started mobilising workers. We used the most effective way of communicating with workers - spread the gospel through word of mouth at the workplace."

On 11 November more than 40 000 workers stayed away from work. This was the fourth major co-ordinated strike action to hit the mines. Workers also collected money, hired combis, and sent some 150 workers to stage a sit-in at Genmin head office in Johannesburg.

- Workers went back to work on 12 November with the aim of consolidating their forces and preparing themselves for 1992, after GENMIN promised to resume negotiations with NUM on recognition, to secure the release of those who had been arrested, and to give a proper hearing to those who were dismissed. The approach of Christmas also put pressure on workers, as they wanted to arrive home for the summer holiday with presents for their children. However, unrest was to continue at Impala. A manager trusted by the workers was removed,



Tsietsi Mohulatsi
discusses new strategies
Photo: Snuki Zikalala/
Labour Bulletin

and replaced by a manager they allege has "a racist attitude towards workers and has always been a stumbling block during negotiations". On three occasions Bop police were called in when workers protested about racial discrimination and other grievances. Workers were attacked with teargas, rubber bullets and birdshot. "It was now a real battle ground," according to committee members.

Workers decided to form an Action Committee to plan protest marches against management repression. Pamphlets demanded the dismissal of the offending manager and others.

- *Labour Bulletin* is in possession of minutes of a high-level meeting between Impala management and the Bophutatswana police and defence force. According to the minutes, the meet-

ing discussed how to prevent workers attending a rally at Phokeng (one manager suggested arresting any bus-drivers who arrived at the rally), the merits of the case of Impala workers arrested for alleged intimidation, and the possibility of purchasing an armoured vehicle.

New year - same struggles

The new year opened with the fundamental problems at Impala unresolved. Management unilaterally rearranged shifts at Bafokeng North, leading to an underground sit-in. 1800 workers were dismissed, sparking a massive strike by 11 000 workers at the mine. 1100 of the dismissed workers were reinstated.

At the same time political tension is rising in the area. The Bafokeng North Action Committee organised a mass meeting to call for reincorporation of Bophutatswana into South Africa. Ten thousand people from the Taung and Phokeng regions attended, including many miners. The meeting decided to launch a mass campaign to put pressure on De Klerk to take a stand on the reincorporation of the bantustan, and also to request CODESA to exclude Mangope. This escalation of political mobilisation increased tension in the mines.

Meanwhile, negotiations over finalising recognition of NUM dragged on through January. NUM has submitted

its constitution to the Bophutatswana government, to show compliance with Chapter V. No reply has been received. After several hitches, Impala and the Workers' Committee seem set to sign an agreement setting out structures and procedures. The only obstacle to formal agreement seems to be registration by Bophutatswana. At last, after many battles and much suffering, the workers of Impala are close to winning basic trade union rights.

4 Conclusion

Four points can be made about the struggles of the past seven months.

Firstly, workers showed enormous courage and militancy in waging their struggle for worker rights against a dictatorial management in a notoriously repressive bantustan. Some 30 workers lost their lives, others lost their jobs and were harassed, beaten, shot, detained and tortured.

Their struggles paid off. Over a period of seven months they organised and co-ordinated four major stoppages involving 30 000 workers or more. They built structures, forced management to negotiate, doubled their wage increase, won rights for the workers' committee and access for NUM, look set to sign an agreement with management, and eventually to win formal recognition for their union.

Secondly, Impala management tried by all means to

White miner joins the struggle

Louis Vosloo was forced to spend Christmas in hiding after his house had been invaded by right-wingers. The reason? He is a white miner at Impala Platinum, one of the two who have joined NUM. Comrade Vossie, as the black workers call him, has aligned himself with their struggle and was elected onto the Workers' Committee.

When I visited him in his hiding place, the bulky boer was delighted to see me. He gave me a bear hug and invited me into the room which he and his wife share with their two children.

"Snuki, you have been through this before. Now I know how it is to be involved in the struggle and have no regrets about my involvement with NUM. Actually, I feel proud that I am now part of those who are changing South African society," said Vossie.

Vossie's wife Anne could not control her tears when she explained her plight. Her daughter is afraid to go back to school in Rustenburg, because right-wingers might harass her. Her class mates call her "kaffirboetie" and "comrade". She has no friends.

"We don't know what is going to happen to us. Vossie who was our breadwinner is no longer employed. It is only through NUM that we are surviving," said Anne.

This was not my first meeting with Vossie. I met the determined miner in July during my visits to Impala in Rustenburg. I first met him in a white bar in the town, shortly after he had addressed a meeting of 12 000 mineworkers.

"I never thought I would be accepted. Rustenburg is a very conservative area and the treatment that white miners give to black workers is terrible. There is a clear racial demarcation at Impala. A black worker knows where his 'place' is.

"When I was told that it was now my turn to speak to the workers, my knees were shaking and I was sweating. But the reaction of workers was tremendous. Before I could speak, they all shouted, 'Viva comrade Vossie!' and 'Down with apartheid!'. When they were told that I might be dismissed for taking part in NUM activities, they shouted, 'An injury to one is an injury to all!' This gave me courage and I regained my confidence. It was the first time in my life that I have been given so much support," said Vossie.

White miners who frequent the bar were surprised to see us having a frank discussion. Some of them passed funny remarks which offended my compatriot. He became red and asked them to leave the place. The two skinny boers saw that they could not challenge Vossie, and ran with their tails between their knees.

Vossie is from a very conservative family. He grew up in Randfontein and managed to finish his standard eight in Groot Marico. His first place of employment was at the railways and he later joined the mines. When he was a child Vossie was indoctrinated with politics of apartheid.

"When I arrived in Rustenburg it was my first time to work with black people. It was a very difficult time for me. I used to say to myself, 'Vossie you have made a big mistake by coming here.'"

"Gradually I got used to black people. As time went on, I started to realise that they were as human as I am. They had the



Vossie and his wife - now on the run

Photo: Snuki Zikalala/Labour Bulletin

same family problems I have," he said.

With his knowledge as a member of the white Mine Workers Union Vossie started to defend black workers who were charged and at times dismissed without any hearing by the management.

"There are a number of black workers in our shaft and these guys are not represented like us. I initiated a Workers' Committee in the shaft. White workers refused to participate. Trying to change their attitude towards their black colleagues was also a fruitless effort.

"The more I defended my black colleagues the more I was accepted by them. But there was a backlash from my white colleagues. They turned their backs on me."

It did not end at work. In October, members of the AWB went to his house and hurled abuse at him and his family. Some of his colleagues harassed him at his house and a fight broke out. "One day I will explode and hell will break loose," said Vossie, flashing his eyes and hitting his big fist on the table.

But what made Vossie leave the Mine Workers Union and join NUM?

Vossie says he left MWU because it was a toothless union. What frustrated him most was that it was not prepared to adapt to changes which are taking place in South Africa and is not prepared to accept blacks in its ranks.

"When I signed up as a member of NUM, I was treated like a human being. I think that my involvement in NUM will show other white workers that apartheid is dead. That we are all human beings and have to work and respect each other. Black workers have shown me that they are not cowards. They will defend you at your work place till the bitter end."

The year has started, Vossie's children cannot go back to school in Rustenburg, he is still on the run. What will happen to him?

"NUM is still fighting my case at Impala. My life is in good hands and I have confidence that things will work out for me," said Vossie. ♦

avoid engaging in serious collective bargaining. Many managers are racist and have no understanding of negotiating with unions. The result was that they lost control of the mines, suffered ongoing strikes and stoppages and falling productivity, estimated to have cost R100 million. Despite using the repressive resources of mine security and bantustan police, they were unable to reassert their authority.

Although NUM showed the positive role that an experienced, disciplined trade union can play in resolving tension and facilitating negotiations, management continued to try to use force to resolve problems.

So while management failed to assert control, the union was unable to consolidate its structures or leadership in the mines. It was, in Golding's words, a stalemate. The result was tension and unrest.

Thirdly, the winning of recognition and consolidation of a union base in Bophuthatswana will increase the pressure on Mangope's regime. As negotiations in CODESA accelerate, and Mangope continues to insist on 'independence' one can expect a surge of opposition in Bophuthatswana. The militant mineworkers of Impala are unlikely to stand on the sidelines.

Fourthly, even when NUM wins formal agreement at Impala, there will be a tough road to travel before effective collective bargaining is established. NUM will

have to put a great deal of effort into consolidating structures and establishing a disciplined 'culture of trade unionism'.

More importantly, management will have to be

thoroughly overhauled and re-orientated if it is to develop a reasonable negotiating relationship with the union and the workers.

Racism, authoritarianism and paternalism will have to be

uprooted, and management will have to learn to accept the 'rule of law' in the workplace. If not, stoppages and discontent will continue to erode Impala's profitability. ☆

Labour Bulletin goes underground

Committee members at Bafokeng North took us on a tour of the mine complex. As we entered, we saw what was left of BONUME offices - rubble.

We visited the hostels. About 32 workers sleep in one room. Ironing is done with charcoal irons. Workers clothes were packed in cardboard boxes under their beds next to their smelly boots. Walls have a dark and dull colour which makes the room depressing. Workers use common toilets and showers.

In the hostel complex there was no sign of recreational centres except for a bar. We visited the kitchen. Workers are given meat twice a week. We tried the pap and beans, but our stomachs could not accept it. Maybe it is because we had a choice.

We then decided on a more risky adventure. Protective helmets and lights were organised. We had no problems in bypassing security. As we entered the lift going down, my heart missed a beat. I imagined workers who have to go through this everyday. The lift stopped at third level, which was about 3 km. As we went through the tunnels, we were stopped by a white miner who demanded written permission from management for us to take pictures and be inside the mine.

He tried to stop us, but we ignored him. It was pointless to abandon our expedition when we were already there. It was very damp and hot inside the mine, my eyes were itching most of the time and my hands were sticky. I felt very uncomfortable and had some problems in breathing. My lungs were getting blocked. I kept praying that we finish our assignment quickly and leave the mine.

Workers dig the ore out with shovels, bending at 45 degrees for eight hours without a break or lunch. Conditions of work are beyond any description. Because of the wet, workers have to wear gumboots which they have to buy with their own money.

When we surfaced a mine manager was waiting. He was boiling, but we persuaded him to let us go. It was a relief for my friend, who has never tasted South African prisons.

Our guide commented: "Things have changed in this mine. Management now fears the power of workers. If it was before mass action, you people were going to taste Mangope's prison." ♦



Living conditons in the hostels

Photo: Robert Gumpert