

THE MINING STRUGGLE CONTINUES 1946 - 1987



Oupa Mike Motlabe

These days Marks Mabeo has a lot of time on his hands. He has not been at work for three weeks. Like 340 000 other mineworkers, he is part of the biggest mine strike in the history of this country.

Two weeks ago, Marks was given R80 and told to leave his hostel at Randfontein Estates. So the young man left for his home in the West Rand township of Mohlakeng. There he found his step-father, an old man called Oupa Mike Motlabe. The two sat down to talk. Marks found that his father had many lessons for the young men on the mines today.

The old warrior told the young fighter about the times when he too worked at the Randfontein Estates mine. He told Marks that the young miners of today were finishing an old battle that his friends began on the mines over forty years ago - in the strike of 1946. This is the old man's story:

FROM THE FREE STATE

"I was born in the Free State in 1921. When I was 16 years old I went to work on the mines. That is how I landed up at the Randfontein Estate gold mine.

"I first worked as a carpenter. I earned 12 pounds in five weeks. White carpenters earned that much in a week. I lived at the

Randfontein compound. The compounds were very crowded. In my room there were 42 people. The beds were lined up one on top of the other. We were not given any blankets - we had to buy them ourselves.

The miners who worked underground used to get thin porridge in the morning before their shift started. The porridge was served from a big bucket. Once a week, on a Friday, we were given a piece of raw meat to cook. Conditions underground were very dangerous. The stopes were very narrow and miners had to crawl around there for twelve hours a shift. Many miners were killed underground. Most were killed in rock falls. It was not a safe place to be in.

J.B MARKS - A STRONG MAN

There was no union on the mine in those days. I remember the time I met Mr JB Marks from the African Mineworkers Union.

I first met Mr Marks in 1945. He was a good man. He was also very strong. He was an ex-teacher. He came from Johannesburg to tell us about the union. I said I would help him organise the workers. It was a difficult job to do because the mine bosses did not want us to speak about it. If they saw us talking to Mr Marks they would

chase him away.

Organising the workers was also difficult. Many workers did not understand what the union stood for. I explained to them that the union would help us fight for better wages, better living conditions and improved safety. After this some workers decided to join.

Every Wednesday Mr Marks used to meet us at the Robinson compound concession store. Some of us had to keep watch in case the mine police came. I would give the names of the new union members plus their membership fee of 30 cents. If the mine police were looking for him, he would come to my house.

Sometimes Mr Marks sent his comrade, Mr Majoro, to see us. They were both very busy. In

was illegal because our union was not recognised.

During the strike Mr Marks gave me forms to fill in. I had to write down how many miners were striking, as well as their names. The police got hold of these forms, and we were questioned. I was warned to stop telling people about the union.

On our mine the strike lasted only two days. On other mines the strike lasted for five days. The police were too strong for us.

After the strike Mr Marks could not come as often as he used to. Then they arrested him. Next I heard he left the country and was in the Soviet Union. I believe he died there.

A HARD NUT TO CRACK

I left the mine in 1957, after 20



ROBINSON CONCESSION STORE changed over the years, but for Oupa Mike it still has many memories

Randfontein there were five compounds. Mr Marks and Mr Majoro had to visit them all.

The union wanted the mine to pay workers 20 cents a shift - an increase of five cents. The bosses refused. They would not listen to the union. The union organised a strike.

THE STRIKE IN 1946

Before the strike started we handed out pamphlets. These pamphlets explained to the workers the reasons for the strike and when it was going to start.

On 12 August 1946, the strike began. The government police came to the compounds at three o'clock in the morning. They chased us out of the compound. They forced us down the shafts. But we refused to work. The police used guns and teargas. Many miners were hurt.

The bosses called a meeting. They said we were doing something dangerous. They said the strike

years service. When I left I got no long service award. I tried many times to get my money but I was not successful. This strike today is just as difficult as our strike was. But the NUM is good. They are strong. They have brought the workers together. They say an injury to one is an injury to all. That is good. It is important that people come together and fight for their rights.

Today, at least NUM can talk to the bosses and to the miners. I want to know why the bosses do not listen to NUM. The union warned about the strike. Why didn't they listen? It could have been avoided.

In my day the bosses and their friends were stronger than us. We were always in trouble for following JB Marks. The children today are strong. They are making history like we did. That is a good thing. The bosses must pay a living wage. They are a hard nut to crack but I know that we will win in the end.



At this hall J.B. Marks met many workers in Randfontein who became members of the AFRICAN MINEWORKERS UNION