

1987 – the year mineworkers take control

Speech by James Motlatsi, President of the NUM:

Comrade Vice-President, Fraternal Guests, Comrades and Friends.

I welcome you to the 5th Annual Congress of the National Union of Mineworkers. It is with regret that our Honorary Life President, Comrade Nelson Mandela, cannot be with us today. He languishes in a racist dungeon, jailed for the past 25 years, for this unflinching commitment to freedom and democracy for South Africa's oppressed people. The greatest monument we can build, in honour for what he stands, is a united NUM and COSATU, which fights side by side with all those committed to ending racist tyranny and capitalist exploitation in our country.

We gather, as you know, at a time of immense crisis in our country and Southern Africa. It is a time which we, as part of the trade union and liberation movement, must make important decisions on the way forward.

We have set the theme for this Congress – 1987 The Year Mineworkers Take Control – in the firm belief, that when mineworkers and, for that matter, the South African working class take control of their lives at all levels, we will be able to solve the problems facing this country of ours.

Discussing this theme during the Congress will raise many questions, and it is my task, through the address, to bring together the issues in ways which will guide the deliberations. It is the task of this Congress to give a clear policy direction to our actions for the next period.

The NUM has come a long way since it was started in August 1982. Today we have over 360,000 members, without doubt, the biggest national union in our country and regarded as the fastest growing union in the world. We have organised mineworkers in the gold, coal, platinum, chrome, antimony, copper and other base metal mines. During the five years, we have established a presence on virtually every mine in South Africa.

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Throughout this time, we have waged many battles against the mine employers. We have fought for our right to exist, in a world where workers have, for over a century, suffered untold hardships and where the right to unionisation was fiercely resisted. We have fought for the right to exist against all odds and this has not been easy. Hostile managements, repressive mine security and police have not stopped the gallant march of mineworkers unity and organisation. Disciplined action, brave leadership by shaft stewards and the general courage of our rank and file have been the reasons for our survival. But we have not come to Congress to air our victories and pat one another on the back.

No! comrades, we have come to evaluate our actions, over the last five years, in order that we may sharpen our organisation, its leadership and its vision of the future. To the mine owners and its trusted partner, the Botha regime, I say, the NUM is here and will remain until victory is won!

The Crisis

But comrades, to guarantee victory we must carefully assess the balance of forces in our country and the general crisis which exists. As one of the greatest champions of workers struggle put it:

Without a clear understanding of the nature and conditions of the struggle, there can be no useful political action.

Comrades, the crisis at hand is a deep rooted one. It is an economic, political and ideological crisis which has placed the liberation movement on the offensive on a number of fronts.

At the same time we have seen large scale repression. Over 20,000 people have been detained during the State of Emergency. If anything it indicates that the Apartheid regime cannot rule in its old way.

Let's take a closer look at the crisis, because how we see things will shape the action we take, and affect the future of the liberation struggle.

Economic Crisis

South Africa is in a structural economic crisis. It is one of economic mismanagement and investment which has not improved the

conditions for the vast majority of people. It is further reflected in the continued impoverishment of the rural economy. In the urban area the social needs of the working class, for example housing, social and health facilities, transport, improved infrastructure and so forth have also not been met. The other factors of the crisis can be seen in:

- * the deepening of the recession;
- * the ranks of the unemployed swell to over 3 million people;
- * steady rise of inflation with the cost of living for workers increased;
- * millions of rand being pumped into the homelands, the tricameral system and other Apartheid projects to keep the dream alive;
- * public sector programmes are sacrificed for expanded military budgets;
- * no productive investment is taking place which creates employment, even though certain sectors have been making significant profits and;
- * the devaluation of the South African rand.

Whilst there have been many arguments that productive investment has not taken place because of capital outflow since 1985, what exists is not a shortage of profit and other cash resources, but the use of these resources.

Comrades while these features of the crisis exist it is not a generalised crisis of profitability. This is so because certain sectors such as mining and finance have made dramatic profits in the last few years. The Sunday Star Finance Review reported that South African corporations, especially the larger ones, have been making all time profit increases. A look at 165 sets of reports released between June and August 1986 by the Johannesburg Stock Exchange showed an average of 72% surge in earnings per share. Of the 165 companies, 72% reported improved earnings, while 5% held steady.

Comrades, it is important that we understand the particular nature of the economic crisis if we are to challenge the employers for improved wages and working conditions. Because they too are using the arguments that times are difficult and that they are unable to meet our demands.

What the crisis has done is put the control of the economic resources in fewer and fewer hands. Put simply, monopoly

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capitalism, through widespread rationalisation, mergers, reorganisation of management structures and production techniques has put the ownership and control of the wealth of this country in the hands of a few giant companies. It is this class, which controls the resources, that refuses to invest the millions they have made in profit, so that jobs can be created, and improve the quality of life. It is because they are only concerned with more profit.

Comrades, these big companies, aided by Botha's economic policies, such as deregulation, border industries, small business development and privatisation are trying to undercut the gains made by the trade union movement. They use these policies to depress wages and develop a situation where no minimum conditions of employment are enforceable.

In general, comrades, it is the working class and oppressed people who have suffered the brunt of the crisis. It is a direct result of the government's policies and because the free enterprise system does not serve the interest of the mass of people. All it has meant is the freedom to exploit and pay poverty wages; the freedom to ignore the demands and needs of the mass of people.

The crisis is a crisis of capitalism, because it will not be able to address our needs and demands. For that we need to find alternatives which will guarantee that the wealth which is produced by the working people is enjoyed by the people. We need a social system which will wipe out the poverty, hunger and disease. We need a social system which will house our families and protect the interests of the working class.

Political and Ideological Crisis

On the political front, the crisis has been most severe. Attempts by the government to impose the tricameral system and community councils have totally failed. Its reform plans have been met with large scale opposition from every part of the country - urban and rural areas. Today they lie in ruins. In the countryside, for example, mass resistance has led to the breakup of so-called tribal authorities and in some instances been replaced with democratic village committees.

It was this rising tide of opposition, which was increasingly gaining a national and generalised character, that forced the government to declare a State of Emergency. With brutal force the

state detained thousands of activists, including trade unionists. The aims of the Emergency have been:

1. To undermine and where possible smash democratic organisation of workers, youth, women and communities.
2. To regulate the flow of information at home and overseas. By limiting information the government wishes to present a picture to the world community that it has everything under control.

The State of Emergency has, no doubt, been brought about by the continuous struggle over the past two years. In particular, the heroic struggle of our youth and students against gutter education has sent the regime into panic. The collapse of government structures and the weeding out of collaborators, and the development of alternative structures, for example, street committees, has taken the struggle to new heights. Although still very uneven, there is a growing realisation that deepening democratic organisation is the only defence against the repression.

To break organisations, wide powers have been given to the police and army to do as they wish. And together with the vigilante squads, a reign of terror has been unleashed against those who dare challenge the Apartheid authority. It is hoped that the morale of resistance will be destroyed. What the state has failed to understand is that to stop the liberation march they will have to stop the nation.

It is clear the regime is totally rejected. It cannot rule in the old way and even within its own ranks divisions have become abundant. Its ability to address the crisis - economically and politically - is not possible. The initiative is now with the oppressed people, with the organised working class under the leadership of COSATU having an important responsibility.

For us as mineworkers there is also a great task ahead. It is vital that we act now, to strengthen our organisation and take the struggle to a new phase. But it depends how we act. We must not underestimate the enemy, nor overlook our weaknesses. Whatever we do should always enhance our organisation, broaden its base and ensure maximum unity in our ranks. It should also steel yet preserve our leadership.

Comrades, there are three areas in which we, as mineworkers, can

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take the struggle forward. Some of these campaigns are narrowly focused, while others are much broader. The common factor is that we wish to control our lives on every front. To start this process is to lay the foundations of a new democratic order. It is a task we cannot postpone. Because the kind of society we want to build, we must build today, and not tomorrow or on liberation day. As one great teacher of struggle put it: "The birth of a new society must be laid in the womb of the old."

Taking control of the hostels

The mining industry, as we all know, is based on the hated migrant labour system. Together with the compounds and the induna system - developed over a century ago - the mineowners have kept us in conditions of wage slavery and oppression. These systems have robbed us of our dignity and destroyed our family life. The empire of the mineowners has been built with the blood, sweat and toil of black workers. Workers' rewards have been low wages, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions. Many comrades have paid the ultimate sacrifice of death at the hands of this brutal capitalist system.

1987 is the year NUM will begin to change this. We will fight every inch of the way to destroy the hostels, migrant labour and the induna system.

The joint investigation by AAC and the NUM into mine violence pointed out that the root cause of the problem is migrant labour and the hostels. This we have repeated over and over since we were formed. The mine owners have been very quiet. They have refused to condemn the system which has brought so much misery, hardship and bloodshed.

The mine owners have refused to admit publicly that for a century they have benefitted from an evil system and are committed to abolishing it. We are calling on the mineowners to state clearly that they will do away with migrant labour and hostels.

We further call on them to commence negotiations immediately with the NUM on how to remove this hated system. Should they fail to heed our call, they will have to face the mass struggles on the mines for control. They can take the view of ignoring the NUM, in the same way the Apartheid government has ignored the calls made by the oppressed people. There are two options: either negotiations start with the NUM to begin the process of dismantling

the migrant labour system, and establish workers' control of the hostels, or, the mineworkers seize control without their involvement. To refuse to negotiate will be at their peril.

In our campaign to remove migrant labour and the hostel system, we have the support of COSATU, our federation, and all other democratic forces.

The death of over 130 miners in violence must be laid at the door of the mineowners. It is clear that miners' belief that adequate protection will be given to them, while at work and in the hostel, was mistaken. Mine security, in some instances with the knowledge of management, have permitted armed thugs, vigilantes and people hostile to the NUM to commit acts of assault and death.

The security and defence of our members has now become a priority. We are calling on mineworkers to take their security and safety into their own hands. They cannot rely on the mine management any longer. Defence committees of mineworkers must be established on every mine to guarantee the safety of all workers against attacks.

Let us consolidate our organisation to defend our members and all mineworkers.

Let us take control of the hostel as the first step to destroy this evil system.

Let us mobilise for action the broadest unity to remove the migrant labour system.

Health and safety

Comrades in spite of the massive profits made by the mining industry, very little is spent on safety. Last year 177 comrades died at Kinross Gold Mine. Death, it seems, has become a feature of mining life. It is only when disasters such as Kinross strikes that everyone takes notice of the safety in the mines. But, we cannot accept this situation.

One more death, is a death too many. And despite the many deaths, the Chamber of Mines refuses to negotiate safety with the NUM. Once again, it shows the way the mine employers want to run the mines without regard for the workers organisation.

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The NUM has already accepted the Miners' Bill of Rights and this will be our loadstar during the health and safety campaign. 1987 is the year we fight for control over safety and health. There will be no retreat on this front.

Living wage campaign

Comrades, there can be no doubt that mineworkers do some of the most dangerous jobs. Yet we earn the lowest wages in the country with the exception of farmworkers. While the mineowners have made millions and millions in profit, we slave for wages which do not allow us to feed, cloth and house our families. In short, we cannot live a decent life.

Comrades, we cannot stand back any longer on this matter. The wealth in the mining industry is produced by our sweat and toil. We showed earlier that the crisis in the country is not one of profitability. The mining industry can pay living wages.

Through organisation we should make 1987 the year we put up wages significantly. Our living wage campaign, together with all COSATU unions, must mobilise every mine into action.

Volunteers for our campaign committees must come forward and build united action in every shaft, mine hostel room and block. The campaign for a living wage is the first phase of our struggle for a better distribution of the wealth of this country. It can never be our solution. As was pointed out, the nature of the crisis in the economy cannot be solved by this government or any capitalist government. Only a democratic socialist order which uses the country's resources for the benefit of its people and not profit will solve the crisis.

Comrades, there are many resolutions which will be discussed in the next few days. Our fight against repatriation, the building of regional mineworkers unity to fight multinational corporations and imperialism in the sub-continent, our energy policy, mechanisation and retrenchment and lastly our political policy will need serious discussion. Let us leave our mark with a clear vision of where we are going in 1987.

Conclusion

Comrades, the answer to our problems on the mines is clear. We

need to take control. 1987 is the year we march in that direction. It is in line with the general march by the oppressed people in this country. From what I have said a few things should be clear.

Under capitalism we will never find a solution to our problems. It is only with a democratic socialist South Africa that the working class and all the oppressed people will have the wealth which they produce under their control.

But to move in that direction requires organisation of the mass of people. Trade unions on their own cannot achieve this task. Although it is a vital force in the overall struggle, our youth, women and communities must be organised and strengthened. As miners and workers we must champion the struggle.

We must build firm, disciplined and effective alliances with the democratic organisations, which have proved in struggle their willingness to sacrifice. In general as part of the working class movement we should present the interests of the oppressed and exploited workers as the general interests of the oppressed people. We should build the vision in which our rights, freedoms, and the advancement of all the working people is guaranteed.

It is only through democratic organisation armed with a revolutionary vision and the courage for action that will bring freedom nearer. Let us not shirk that task as mineworkers. 1987 is the year we take control and build for that future.

Forward to democracy and socialism!
Forward with the workers struggle!
Forward to victory!

NUM congress: political resolution

Congress noting that:

- 1.1 The unity of mineworkers in particular and workers in general as part of the working class is of paramount importance and a threat to the evil system of apartheid and capitalism;
- 1.2 The workers in this country are not only striving for better working conditions in the mines, but for a democratic

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socialist society controlled by the working class.

- 1.3 The present form of government is based on racial oppression and the brutal exploitation of the democratic majority;
- 1.4 The workers' struggle in the mines cannot be separated from the struggle in the community;
- 1.5 There are other progressive organisations fighting the same battle against oppression and exploitation (e.g. students' struggle for people's education, community organisations fighting against rent which people cannot afford);
- 1.6 Apartheid and capitalism are two inseparable evils that must be smashed;
- 1.7 The Congress of the people which was held in Kliptown on 26 June 1955 was representative of all the patriotic forces in our country when the Congress adopted a programme of minimum demands which came to be known as the Freedom Charter;
- 1.8 That the Political Policy adopted by COSATU, that COSATU should not affiliate to any political organisation but should co-operate with other progressive organisations has caused confusion as many organisations claim to be progressive, resulting in many elements exploiting that situation.
- 1.9 Due to the confusion that has arisen within COSATU and its affiliates regarding the definition of progressive organisations we should co-operate with, it has become imperative that such organisations should be clearly defined.

Congress therefore resolves that:

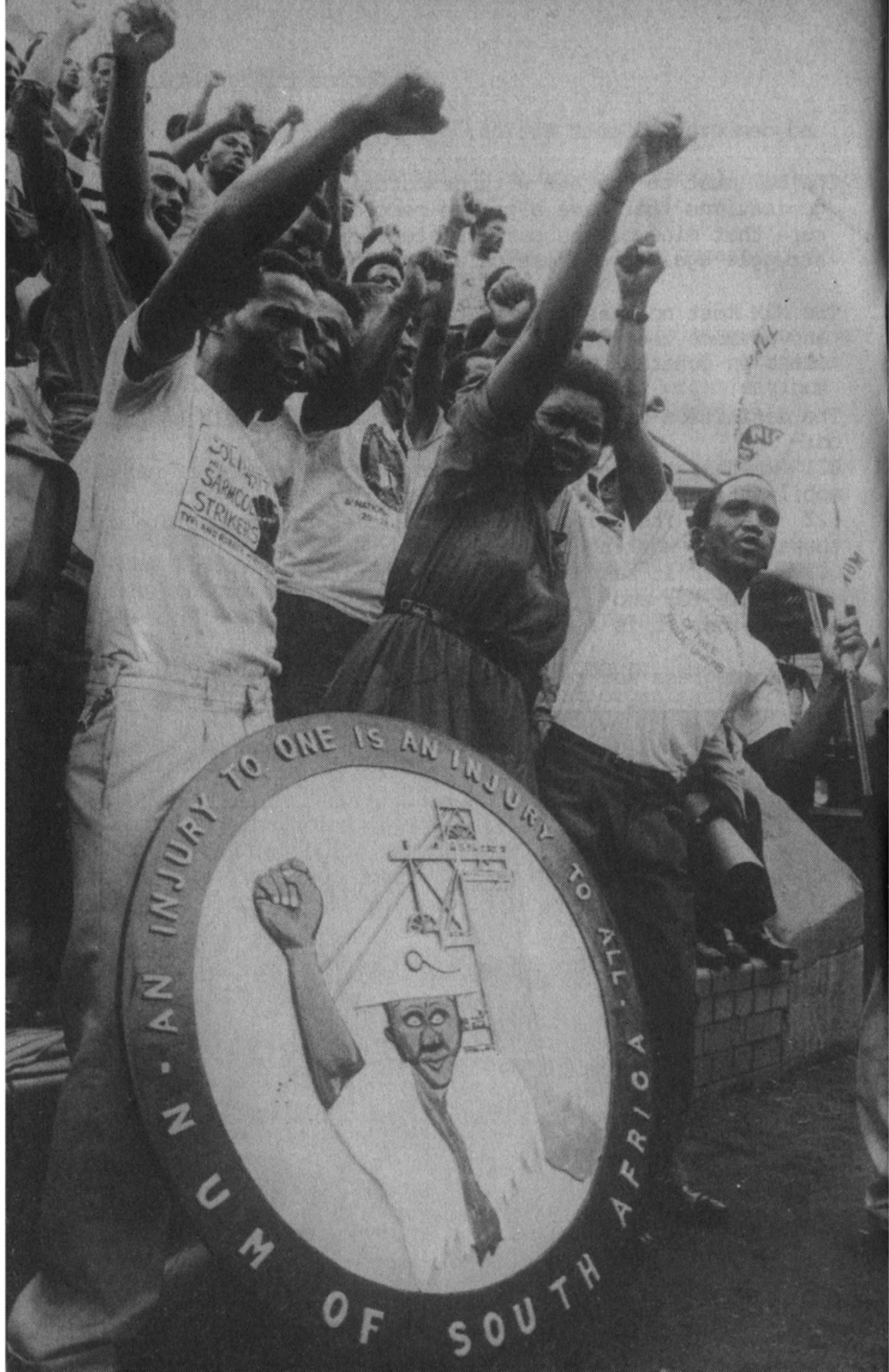
1. The Freedom Charter as adopted by the Congress of the People on 26 June 1955, is hereby recognised as a guiding document in our struggle from national oppression and economic exploitation;
2. All mineworkers should be united under the constitution and political policy of the NUM and COSATU;
3. The NUM and the organised working class in COSATU must play their historic leading role in the struggle for a non-racial

and democratic South Africa;

4. The NUM must co-operate with democratic and progressive organisations that have a proven record of struggle and make sure that mineworkers participate effectively in the struggle against oppression and exploitation;
- . The NUM must not hesitate to take political action to defend and advance the interests of its members and the working class in general;
- . The definition of progressive organisations should be based on:-
 - 6.1 whether the organisation has a proven record of mass mobilisation and action in our struggle;
 - 6.2 whether its principles and policies are compatible with those of the working class;
 - 6.3 whether it has a mass based constituency it is answerable to; and
 - 6.4 whether it is a democratic organisation.

photos: NUM congress and rally 25.2.87 - 1.3.87 (Afrapix)





SOLIDARITY
WITH THE
SARWOL
STRIKERS
THEY ARE FIGHTING

NUMERUM OF SOUTH AFRICA

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL