

The struggle for health and safety in the unions

In this article, Frank Meintjies and Dirk Hartford take a critical look at current union organisation around health and safety.

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Critical health and safety problems face workers in every sector of the economy. Despite this, COSATU affiliates and other trade unions have done relatively little on the ground to build the struggle for a healthy workforce and a safe workplace.

This is not because the issue is seen as unimportant. On the contrary, officials from COSATU and NACTU affiliates acknowledge that health and safety issues need urgent and serious attention. Yet, almost without exception, union leaders - themselves working in an unhealthy, stressful, crisis-management type environment - are uncertain about how best to take up health and safety struggles. In addition, health and safety in day to day union work and campaigns invariably assumes a very low priority.

Although NACTU, COSATU and most of their affiliates have passed bold resolutions on health and safety for adoption at National Congresses as Federation/Union policy, they tend to remain unacted upon. (Union resolutions on health and safety can be found on page 61)

The major exception to this is the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) which has made health and safety a serious and major part of its work. NUM's experience, however, might not be the most appropriate for the rest of the trade union movement. This article examines the question of health and safety structures in general and NUM's experience with these structures in particular.

Debates around health and safety

For workers who are struggling to build and maintain democracy and worker control in their organisations, every issue must be taken up, debated and acted upon through structures.



Anti-Labour Relations Act protests took place nationally - can workers be mobilised around health and safety struggles in a similar way?

Ever since health and safety issues began to be raised in the independent labour movement in the early eighties, a debate has been going on about how best to organise around these issues. The essential issue has concerned health and safety structures. Various options exist:-

- Established shop steward structures, where health and safety issues feature alongside all other issues on the agenda of the shopsteward committee. This is the case in certain workplace unions like NUMSA, SACCAWU, TGWU, FAWU and CWIU.
- Independent health and safety structures, where workers other than shopstewards are elected to a committee to deal specifically with health and safety issues. Only the NUM has these structures. CWIU have recently employed a full-time person for health and safety work, and TGWU plans to do the same.
- Combinations of these two - either as:
 - a safety sub-committee of the shopstewards committee which plays a supportive role to shopstewards during negotiations;
 - or a sub-committee which negotiates itself on health and safety issues. Examples of this have occurred in NUMSA, SACCAWU and TGWU.
- A situation where elected worker representatives, shopstewards or safety stewards, *sitting on the management-controlled structures that have been set up under MOSA.** This is happening in a number of unions where, despite an official position to boycott these structures, union members have been drawn in by management.

The major debate emerging is whether to have independent structures or to have the existing shop steward structures dealing with the issue - both have advantages and

* For more information on MOSA please see page 58.

disadvantages. Perhaps the real problem is that the question is wrongly posed. Structures - the form that organisation takes - grow out of struggle and not vice versa. If this is correct, the question is: what campaigns and struggles can the unions build to mobilise unionised workers in the health and safety arena. If this is done properly, won't the nature of these structures be determined by experience and struggle. The COSATU's living wage and Labour Relations Act (LRA) campaigns are examples of this process. The question would then be, what struggles and campaigns can be used to achieve this.

NUM health and safety organisation - lessons to be learnt

The National Union of Mineworkers is the only union which has set up and sustained independent health and safety structures.

In the mining industry an average of 800 workers have been killed each year since 1900; an average of 12 000 reportable injuries occur each year (a reportable injury means the worker is off work for more than 2 weeks); and massive mining disasters like Hlobane, the Ermelo gas explosion and Kinross have all occurred during the unions short life. It is not surprising, therefore, that the NUM is at the forefront of health and safety struggles.

The NUM have developed a "top-down" approach to health and safety structures. A Health and Safety department, now staffed by three people has been set up in the Head-Office. Six regional safety organisers were employed to build health and safety structures and deal with health and safety issues. Independent health and safety structures were then built parallel to the union's shaftsteward structures. Finally, the whole area was formalised, in union terms, through a national health and safety congress where a national health and safety committee was elected.

The result has been that the whole arena of health and safety has become divorced from the other tasks and struggles of the union. The health and safety structures and organisers have become a kind of in-house service organisation rather than an instrument for struggle. Consequently the department, at all levels, is overloaded with mainly administrative tasks like filing for compensation claims, filling in death benefit forms, getting workers medically checked and working out responses to management's initiatives around AIDS and other issues.

Because of this the NUM is currently involved in a serious reappraisal of its whole approach to health and safety with a view to trying to reintegrate health and safety issues and structures into the heart and struggle of the organisation.

NUM has learnt another valuable lesson by being at the cutting edge of the labour movements health and safety struggle. That is that many of the traditional "health and safety issues", like heat, dust and noise, which have been pushed hard by health and safety service organisations (HSSO's) in particular, are not the issues that workers are

identifying to struggle around. This is not because workers don't see them as important or don't understand their dangers. On the contrary, they are acutely aware of how hazardous they are. Instead, mineworkers have more immediate and pressing issues that are bothering them. These include having to pay for their own boots, overalls and belts and dealing with the racist attitudes and the often inferior quality medical treatment of many of the medical doctors on the mines that workers are forced to consult. Workers are also often repatriated when they are ill and are never able to return to the mines.

The NUM identifies other issues - like lung diseases, the need to demand medical records, dust levels and state involvement in the monitoring of health and safety risks - as important. But some of these are only important in specific areas, so are not suitable for mobilising national campaigns around. What is needed is to identify the issues, from workers' own experience, that will provide the basis for a national health and safety struggle in the NUM and beyond.

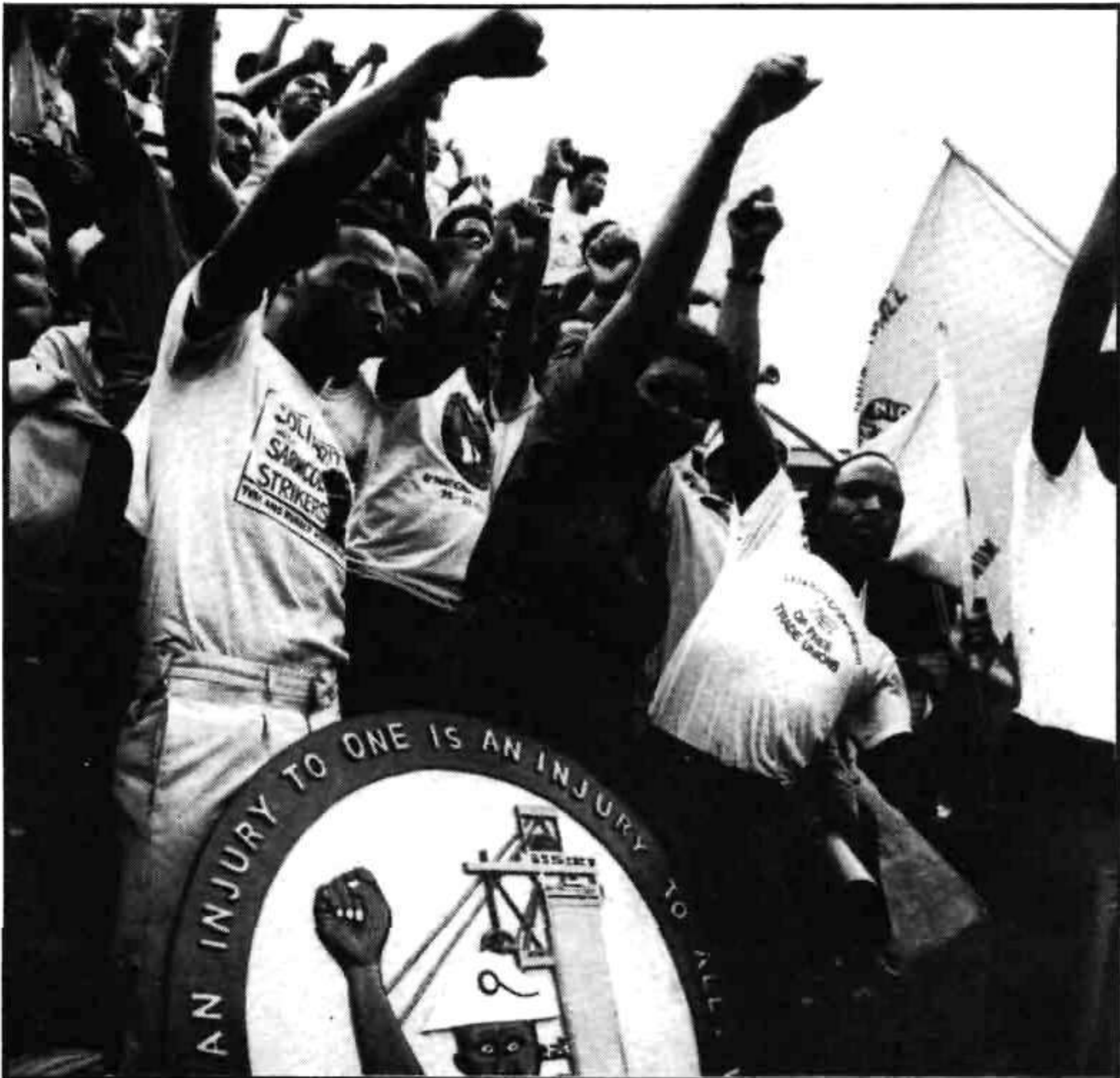


Unions are debating the kind of structures needed to organise around health and safety issues.

Organising around health and safety - other unions

In other unions health and safety struggles have been confined either to single issue campaigns and struggles (SACCAWU on maternity/paternity rights; TGWU on AIDS; FAWU on dust) or to particular workplace-based health and safety struggles (SACTWU's brown lung campaign; FAWU's grain dust struggle) or to research and discussion on how best to take up health and safety issues (NUMSA and CWIU).

While "one-off" health and safety campaigns such as those mentioned may be necessary, what lessons unions have learnt from these struggles is that the development of an ongoing approach to strategies for health and safety organisation is required.



The dangers involved in the mining industry have propelled the NUM to the forefront of health and safety struggles.

The health and safety service organisations (HSSO)

One of the most active participants around health and safety in the labour field are the HSSO's. Almost all of the "one-off" type initiatives that have occurred in various unions have involved the HSSO's. Usually the workers raise a health or safety problem that the union officials don't know how to deal with, and a HSSO is consulted. They provide expertise, research back-up, on-site inspection and examinations if necessary, as well as help for the negotiating team to formulate arguments and demands for negotiations. Once the issue has been "settled", the role of the HSSO is over. Perhaps because the HSSO's have primarily developed this kind of responsive relationship with the unions, they have also concentrated on those issues they have been called upon to address. Yet these, as the experience in NUM bears out, might not always be the issues that workers are prepared to mobilise and fight around initially. This could explain why there has hardly ever been a strike, for example, around a health and safety issue.

The HSSO's are the only people in or near to the labour movement, apart from the NUM, who are thinking and working on these issues all the time. A number of unions feel that COSATU should take the initiative - given the HSSO's are willing - to structure and co-ordinate work of HSSO's - so that it begins to impact more fundamentally on the work of the federation as a whole. This is beginning to happen with other specialised areas that COSATU faces, eg lawyers in Natal, economists in economic trends, high-tech computer specialists for computer-based information networks.

Conclusion

The crucial task facing unions in the health and safety arena, we believe, is to identify the issues around which all workers can be mobilised and through which structures can be built to address the hundreds of different health and safety problems which confront workers in different industries everyday. An obvious and clear national issue that affects the whole working class - employed and unemployed - and which is part of the policy of the trade union movement, is the struggle for a national health service under workers' control. As we write thousands of hospital workers are on strike in the provincial hospitals. This strike alone provides the basis on which to launch such a campaign - by linking the demand of the workers for better wages and working conditions to the demand of the whole working class for accessible and adequate health care. Under this broad demand the myriad of health and safety problems that exist can be raised to give meat to the campaign - whether by workers as producers or as consumers. Actions - such as those in the hospital defiance campaign - can be mobilised again to unite and give solidarity to hospital workers whose co-operation is essential for a struggle for worker control of the hospitals.