

# Who controls Noaha?

SOME mineworkers tell the tale of a great snake-like monster — Noaha — which lives deep down in the mines. Occasionally Noaha gets angry and storms down the tunnels leaving a trail of dead miners.

This is their explanation for the fact that so many miners are killed far away from the scene of mine explosions.

On August 13, 30 miners were killed in a methane gas explosion in the Middelbult colliery which supplies the giant Sasol II and III plants at Secunda in the Transvaal.

Thirteen of them were killed near the blast but the rest were up to two kilometres away.

Apparently the force of an underground explosion in the narrow tunnels of the mines is so great that even miners a few kilometres away from the blast are 'concussed' to death.

In statements to the press, Sasol management said that methane gas had always 'plagued' the mine industry.

'The gas seeps out of the exposed coal and because it is odourless and colourless, it is difficult to detect,' they said.

However, it is possible to detect methane gas and many methods have been developed in order to make coal mining as safe as possible for mineworkers.

But mine bosses in their search for profits do not always stick to even the minimum

safety measures laid down by law.

At a similar explosion in September 1983 at the Hlobane Colliery in Natal, 68 miners were killed.

At the inquest, it was found that the ventilation in the mine did not provide the amount of air laid down by law, that the ventilation in two sections would not have been able to clear the methane, that a week before methane gas had been found but it had not been reported, and that a number of electrical machines were not flameproofed.

At the time of the Hlobane accident, Iscor's Vryheid Railway and Coal Company had a four star safety rating awarded by the Chamber of Mines and two department of Mineral and Energy Inspectors had described it as 'not a bad mine'.

Sasol's Middelbult has been recently awarded a full five stars for safety standards.

But mineworker members of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union report that although modern equipment for the testing of methane gas is supplied, often safety procedures are ignored.

Production, they say, on this the world's most productive coal mine is more important than safety. Naturally Sasol has denied this.

Soon after the explosion the union sent an investigating



team to Middelbult consisting of lawyers, mining engineers, union officials and shop stewards to inspect the area where the explosion took place.

The CWIU will be representing the deceased and injured workers at the inquest where the cause of the explosion will be established.

The Middelbult explosion has once again highlighted the importance of health and safety. And has led the CWIU to declare 1986 as 'The year of the fight for our lives'.

In a recent pamphlet, the

union said that in South Africa 2 800 workers were killed at work each year — roughly every 3 hours another worker is killed.

There are also 355 000 accidents causing injuries each year and 'thousands more of us are dying slowly or getting sick from poisoning by the dangerous chemicals and materials we work with.'

'Let us begin to plan the fight

for our health and safety at work. Money is no good if you are too sick to spend it, or dead,' it concluded.

The CWIU has begun its battle against Noaha — a monster which seems to be firmly under the control of the mine bosses.

# Massive force used to crush mine strike

ABOUT 30 000 mineworkers went on strike on September 1 and 2 on one Anglo Vaal, three Gencor and six Goldfields mines after management refused to improve their wage offer.

At least 80 workers were arrested and more than 30 injured in the two day strike which saw widespread police and mine security action against mineworkers.

Hundreds were also bused out while the National Union of Mineworkers took legal steps

in an attempt to prevent mass dismissals.

By Tuesday midday, however, the strike had been reduced to a hard core of five mines involving 10 500 workers.

Anglo Corporation, JCI and Rand Mines gave in to the unions 22 percent wage demand resulting in a settlement for 80 percent of the union's membership.

This was after months of negotiations and a strike ballot by the union which showed substantial support for strike

action.

Three other mine houses refused to increase their wage offer and although the union was not very strongly organised at these mines the workers wanted to go on strike.

- The mines effected were:
- Gencor Transvaal Navigation Colliery: 1 500 took action of Sunday afternoon August 31 and returned to work after being dispersed with tear gas and rubber bullets.
  - Matla Collieries: 2 000 workers.
  - Marievale: up to 1 000 to 2 000 workers took action from Sunday night.
  - Beatrix Gold mine: 7 000 workers. Many shaft stewards at the mine were arrested. Workers were also forced to go underground by mine security using dogs and sjamboks.
  - Blinkpan Collieries: 1 500 workers were reported to have been starved by management at the hostels in an attempt to force them back to work.
  - Stilfontein Goldmine: 400 miners at one shaft attempted action, but two shaft stewards were arrested. Rubber bullets were also used to disperse workers resulting in six casualties and 55 dismissed by Wednesday September 3.
  - St Helena: 9-10 000 took action.
  - Anglo Vaal's Hartebeesfontein: about 2000 took some action on Sunday

night but were forced back to work. 15 workers were arrested and 100 isolated from the rest of the workers.

- Goldfields' Deelkraal Goldmine: although not on the planned strike list staged a strike of 5-7 000 workers. There were many confirmed injuries at the mine. It was Goldfields' threat to dismiss workers which led to the NUM's taking legal action.
- Kloof Goldmine: the entire leadership was removed before workers could take any action. 23 miners appeared in court related to action on Sunday night.
- West Driefontein Goldmine: attempts to strike were broken through tight security presence.

By Tuesday due to the heavy police presence and threats of mass dismissals the strike fizzled out forcing the union to take legal action in the industrial court. NUM's court case will test management's right to dismiss workers while on a legal strike.

On Wednesday September 4 the NUM won an interim interdict blocking Gencor from evicting mineworkers from Marievale pending the outcome of the industrial court case.

Many shaft stewards said hundreds of strikers were forced back underground at gun point.

At Deelkraal goldmine police

and mine security occupied the workers hostels for two days.

Workers interviewed said 'When we started striking the police came and they started shooting tear gas and rubber bullets and were sjamboking us. Many fled to the nearby hills and slept there for the night.'

'When we tried to regroup they baton charged us. Many of our friends were badly hurt and taken away. We have not seen them since.'

For workers the painstaking process of negotiation seems futile if they can be dismissed when on a legal strike.

NUM general secretary Cyril Ramaphosa condemned 'the despicable and intimidatory behaviour' of mine management.

He added that the union would have to seriously consider future strike strategies.

'By warning management of the strike, on specific mines they were obviously mobilising and prepared to crush the workers. Some of our most effective strikes were taken at short notice where management were not prepared,' he said.

The divided offer by the chamber of mines was an attempt to split the union and attack the union at its weakest areas.

While this has succeeded in some respects it was only possible through heavy handed action by mine management.



Miners drilling for gold