

Cyril Ramaphosa - NUM

CUSA passed a resolution at its annual congress in August 1982 to form a trade union for black mineworkers. Since then the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has recruited 18,000 mineworkers. In this interview from CUSA NEWS (Feb 83) general secretary Cyril Ramaphosa talks about the background of the union, its aims, its progress and the problems it has faced.

How was the union started and why was it formed?

Towards the end of 1980 and throughout 1981, mineworkers persistently came to CUSA and asked us to organise workers in their industry. These requests became even more persistent last year.

Because of the harsh treatment mineworkers received from mine bosses, and because they were not organised, CUSA subsequently passed a resolution at its national congress in July last year, mandating the CUSA secretariat to launch a union for black mineworkers.

What was the next step towards launching the union?

A decision was then taken at Hammanskraal in August 1982 to launch the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). In December it held its first annual congress in Klerksdorp. Thirteen mines from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were represented by about 1,800 mineworkers.

What are the aims of NUM?

Its aims are (1) to recruit and unite into a single organisation all workers employed in the mining industry in order to improve their economic and social welfare, and (2) to improve the wages and working conditions as well as the social benefits of members.

What progress has NUM made so far towards achieving these aims?

So far we have recruited 18,000 mineworkers into the union. We are also now in the process of applying for recognition agreements. We want to get involved in the collective bargaining process with the Chamber of Mines to improve the wages and working conditions of our members.

At which mines have you applied for recognition so far?

At the Western Holdings' Welkom Division, the Elandsrand Mine, the President Brand Mine and the Saaiplaas Mine. Applications to the Kloof and Vaal Reefs West Mines are also in the pipeline.

What problems has the union come across since it was launched?

Management is intimidating workers in an attempt to discourage them from joining our union. They are also refusing to allow us to organise workers as we see fit, putting a lot of restraints on our organising activities.

NUM also has a problem of consolidating our membership. We want to gain maximum loyalty to our union. To achieve this, we are presently working on having shaft steward committees elected as well as regional committees.

What is the potential membership of NUM?

Our potential membership could well be over 100,000. Our target for this year is 50,000. At this rate we will be able to manage and service 50,000 workers by the end of this year.

We have 15 full-time organisers based on the mines at the moment. Next year we will need more staff.

Why do you think NUM has been growing so rapidly?

Mainly because of our organising strategies. We are proud to say that our organising strategies have been well-gearred for the workers on the mines.

Another reason why NUM is growing so fast is because black mineworkers have not been represented by a union for all these years. Suddenly they see that representation is possible through a union.

A third reason is because we strongly believe in worker control and worker participation in all activities of the union. This is reflected in the structure of NUM (shaft steward committees, regional committees, etc).

Does NUM have a working relationship with other black mineworkers' unions?

We have an open-door policy. We would very much like to co-operate with other

black mineworkers' unions. So far, however, other unions have not seen reason to co-operate with us. But discussions are taking place to see if there is any basis for co-operation.

What is NUM's attitude towards the new Confederation of Associations and Mining Unions?

Our members decided not to attend the Confederation's inaugural conference. It was set up as a white, racist collective bargaining front which is seeking to frustrate the interests of the black workers.

What is NUM's attitude towards registration?

Our members rejected registration because they feel it is a method that the government uses to control unions and stifle their development. We feel we are fully capable of running our union without government interference. We won't register until registration procedures have changed.

And the union's attitude towards industrial councils?

We are opposed to the formation of an industrial council in the mining industry. Industrial councils are usually too bureaucratic to serve any useful purpose to workers. The industrial council in the mining industry would in any case be dominated by white unions who would seek to frustrate the interests of our black members.

What do you regard as the root cause of labour unrest on the mines?

The root cause has been management's lack of communication with the workers. They are very paternalistic and treat workers as though they were tools and not human beings. The workers have often had to react in frustration against management.

What is unique about NUM? What makes it different from other mineworkers' unions?

We operate on democratic lines. We want to try to ensure that our shaft steward committees run the day-to-day affairs of the union at shaft level.
