

Obituary

Elijah Barayi *'A man I will never forget'*



By JAMES MOTLATSI,
NUM President

"Our Comrade Elijay Barayi has a special place in the affection of the National Union of Mineworkers. He helped to form it, organise and administer it and give it political direction. He threw himself into the task of organising workers who had always been regarded as unorganisable. There were testing times which revealed the best and the worst in each of us. With Barayi the best was very good and the worst was tolerable.

He was a loyal Comrade, an honest Comrade, a trustworthy Comrade. He was our Comrade. We would criticise him, but no one else could.

He and I learned our trade unionism together. When I first met him on 3 December 1982, the day before the opening of the inaugural Congress of the Union, we were both

novices. He had read a newspaper report that Cyril Ramaphosa was trying to form a union of mineworkers so he set about organising a branch at the Blyvooruitzicht Gold Mine where he worked as a personnel assistant. At the Congress he was unknown but he quickly asserted himself through his fine powers of oratory and was elected Vice President of the Union - a position he held until his death. It was not long before he moved from being novice to expert.

I saw him in many roles during the 12 years we worked together. He was a good communicator and skilled at explaining issued to ordinary mineworkers. I saw him at his best at Kloof and Vaal Reefs on successive days in September 1984, when we had our first official strike. He had to explain an almost incomprehensible offer from the Chamber of Mines.

He was fearless in the face of danger and took many

risks, sometimes with his life. It did not matter whether it came from the police, as when he intervened to stop them using rubber bullets and tear gas at East Driefontein in 1985, or from hostile workers, as when he moved between groups of heavily armed mineworkers at Vaal Reefs in 1985 and Western Deep Levels in 1986 in order to stop faction fighting. When he intervened in a dispute at Klerksdorp on 17 June 1987 the police assaulted him and broke his arm.

It is odd now some things remain in your memory. I remember the incident at East Driefontein, not because of the violence, but because of a long walk in the rain. The police ordered our driver to leave so that quite late at night and in very heavy rain we had to walk 15km before we could get to a place of safety.

But Barayi was equally at home in difficult negotiations. He played a prominent part in the unity talks at Soweto in June 1985 when they threatened to break down over the question as to whether we ought to follow the principle of non racialism or anti-racism. He was for non-racialism and his argument won the day. Then, the same year, Barayi led an NUM walkout at the Unity talks meeting at Wilgespruit over whether all the unions, despite their size and financial contributions, should have equal representation or not. On that occasion, as on most others, he was on the winning side.

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Barayi's role in the formation of COSATU ensured that he would play a leading part in it. He became President on 2 December 1985 and helped to steer it through the difficult years before the ANC and the SACP were unbanned. There is a tendency nowadays to forget those difficult and eventful years. Being a trade union leader then, was like walking a tightrope over a prison yard. One little mistake and you were in prison. Barayi was an expert tightrope walker. He ceased to be President of COSATU in 1991. By then the political situation had changed and new people had arisen. He had done his job.

Barayi had lots of humility. It is a quality that is rather scarce amongst leaders.

He drank with our members, joined in their festivities, *talked their language*. He was an exaggerated version of an ordinary person. But when you put him on a rostrum he was transformed. He gripped his audience and swung them to his way of thinking. Sometimes he got carried away by his own exuberance and went well beyond his brief, imposing ultimatums or making demands he had not discussed beforehand. But that was a small price to pay for his magnificent oratorical performances.

We saw less of him in head office as he approached retirement. You needed lots of energy to live the life of an

active union leader and to hold down a job in the mine at the same time. It exhausted him and shortened his life. He sacrificed himself for the union and the Liberation struggle.

Comrade Barayi, the Union is going to miss you, the Movement is going to miss you and I am going to miss you. You have served us well in effort, solidarity and friendship. We are sorry that you will not be here to cast your vote, for that is what you have been striving for all these years. I am sorry, too, that you will not be able to make your voice heard in the new democratic Parliament. As it is, you will remain in our memories. Long live the Militant Spirit of our fallen Comrade!!! Sleep well Comrade Barayi!!! ☆

Photo: Associated Press



Photographer Abdul Shariff was shot and killed in Kattlehong during a 'visit for peace' by the ANC on January 9 this year. We at Umanyano worked with Shariff for almost three years. In that time, he took a lot of

pictures of South African workers, sometimes in the workplace, other times on strike or marching through the streets in the struggle for a better deal.

Shariff loved his work and that is why he went into the danger zones of our suffering society to record what was happening there. That love ended his life, but before it did, it gave him a reason to live. He now lives on in the pages of the Labour Bulletin and The Shopsteward and in other publications.

We have been fighting for our rights as workers and for political rights for all

South Africans. We must also fight for the right of journalists to do their jobs without threat of violence, just as much as we have to fight for the right of all people to live their lives in peace.

Shariff has joined the thousands killed by the violence of our society. He was almost part of the new South Africa. We have lost a compatriot, another victim added to the list which gets bigger every day.

The killing must stop. Peace cannot come soon enough. Hamba kahle, Shariff. ☆