

Profile

A love of working with people

Morice Smithers interviews Gwede Mantashe, national organiser of NUM

I was born at Cala in the Transkei 36 years ago. I grew up and had my schooling there. I had problems with my schooling because my family didn't take education seriously and also, as I came from a peasant family, there was no money as such. I had to work part-time to try and get money to continue with my schooling.

In 1972 when I was doing my matric, I got involved politically in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and became the chairman of the west Transkeian branch. The SCM wasn't pro-ANC or pro-PAC. Both organisations were projected as sister liberation movements. I personally opted for the ANC because I learned from discussion that it had a longer history of involvement in the struggle.

I matriculated in 1973, but was unable to go beyond that, so I got a job with the Transkeian government. I couldn't get happiness there because I disagreed with many of the things that were happening.

In 1975, I joined the mines, starting at Western Deep Levels. I underwent training with the Anglo recreation department in Welkom. I did very well and so my career in the mining industry was mainly sport organisation. I myself played rugby and did athletics.

At that time in the mining industry there was no unionism. But we still tried to challenge our conditions. As a result, I only lasted at Western Deep for 7 months before being dismissed.

I then went to Prieska Copper in the Northern Cape. There was no recreation department, so I managed to get the task of starting a welfare department. I remained in that department on that mine for the next 7 years.

I enjoyed the work because I was dealing with the practical problems faced by workers. Things like compensation, remittance of money, personal problems, cash advances for those with financial problems. Through this I developed a love of working with people.

Discovering NUM

NUM was formed in 1982 while I was still at Prieska Copper. We started to read about this union, but it sounded very far away to us in the Northern Cape. In 1983 I resigned from Prieska and joined Maatla colliery in Witbank. When I got there, the union wasn't there. We wondered where we could find this union that we were hearing about. We came across NUM pamphlets and through them we managed to track the union down. So we hired a car and went to Lekton House in Johannesburg.

You must remember we were migrant workers and coming to Johannesburg was a difficult thing. We saw it as a very big city where you could get robbed. But we came and we met Cyril and discussed with him ways of organising. We took forms back and started recruiting clandestinely. NUM at that time didn't have enough organisers and so the union relied on the workers on each mine to do the organising. At Maatla Coal I don't remember ever seeing an organiser from 1983 to 1985 when we attained recognition.

It wasn't easy to organise. Some people were victimised and dismissed if it was known that they were recruiting for the union. I was in an advantageous position because I was a sport organiser. I had access to various teams and used the

team captains in soccer, rugby, tribal dancing and so on to organise. Because I was doing very well as a sports organiser, I think they were reluctant to take action against me.

Getting recognition was very difficult. You must remember it was a Gencor mine and these were very terrible. We would organise people, but they would get disillusioned because we never attained recognition. The surrounding mines were all Amcoal mines and there they could get recognition easily. Some of them started after we did and got recognition before us.

After the 1985 strike, we took a decision as workers that we were going to organise all Gencor mines. We organised a Gencor shopstewards council within the NUM unofficially, and it was out of that council that we managed to reach out to the other mines.

By April 1986, the number of recognised mines in Gencor increased from 4 to 13. We as workers in the collieries had to target other collieries and gold miners the gold mines. Our approach was that the power of the union was not with the officials or the organisers. It was with us the workers because we were feeling the exploitation and the oppression.

When we were recognised, I became the first chair of the branch. Then in 1985, I was elected a regional secretary of the NUM for the whole Witbank region. I remained in that position until 1988 when I came here. When we formed a COSATU region in the Highveld in 1986, I was the first chairperson. In 1988, I resigned as a worker and then resigned my two positions in NUM and COSATU to become an organiser. Now I am the national organiser of NUM.

We are stronger

One of the reasons that I joined the union full-time was that I thought my involvement was too limited in the collieries. I thought things were not as bad in the collieries as they were in the gold mines. I also wanted to work full-time so I could use my organisational experience to help build NUM. After the 1987 strike there was a dip organisationally, but not very seriously in terms of membership. Our membership dropped from close to 300,000 to 202,000, but I think we recovered quickly from that situation. Paid-up membership is around 264,000 now, with signed-up above 300,000.

But that membership is going to drop gradually because of retrenchments which are facing the industry, unless we in NUM work harder. We take the retrenchment issue very seriously.

Our view is that it is not just an economic decision. It is also a political decision by management who want to restructure and streamline the industry. We say that because, even before the price of gold fell, mines like Genmin had retrenched workers on the basis of rationalisation. There was also major retrenchment resulting from mechanisation in Western Areas before the price went down.

So we say that we see the problem of the price of gold, but we are not convinced that the best is done at Chamber level to address the question of retrenchment. Our view is also that retrenchment should not be an issue that is dealt with on the basis of individual mines. It should be seen as a national problem, involving not only NUM and the Chamber, but also the government. It should not be left to individual mine managers to take major decisions like cutting the workforce in the industry to the extent that they intend to do.

Other problems facing the union

This industry is very conservative. You must understand that even in terms of earnings, it is only better than domestic workers and agricultural workers. But miners are amongst the most hard-working workers and are exposed to very serious dangers. Our view, therefore, is that mineworkers should be the best paid workers in any given country.

There is also the problem of racial discrimination. Historically, many jobs were reserved for whites in terms of the Mines and Works Act. Despite the fact that this has been scrapped, not enough people are being trained for these jobs. For example, the number of miners who were trained in 1990 is half the number trained in 1989.

That means racial discrimination is alive and well. Our opinion is that apartheid originated in the Chamber of Mines. The Bernstein Commission said in 1911 that if there was a desire to see people working in the mining industry, land must be taken away from them, they should be taxed, and their customs should be diluted and made to seem backward. If you take those recommendations and link them with the passing of the Land Act in 1913, you see that they contributed practically in formulating apartheid policies. Even now in this time of change, the mining industry will hold back unless mineworkers themselves act to put pressure on management.

Today most white mineworkers support the CP because they see that as their hope of pres-

erving their jobs and privileges. But I personally don't see that lasting too long. I am involved in dealing with Escom. There we have the Mineworkers Union and Yster and Staal, both very reactionary unions, sharing platforms with us. I think we have more common ground with these right-wing unions than with the middle ground unions, like the Boilermakers Society and others. Those are more aligned to management.

If our interaction is used correctly and we gain access to them, I'm sure white workers can be shifted over to understand the actual concept and needs of the working class. They will start realising that they are part of that class and not of something called a 'white working class'.

We need to redress the inequalities in the mining industry and nationalisation is one way of doing it. In 1985, research showed that black mineworkers earned 13 times less than white mineworkers. If the mines are nationalised those inequalities will be redressed.

Of course, some people will respond badly to the idea of nationalisation. But my argument is that it is about nothing but government intervention, and my view as an ordinary mineworker is that the solution to the crisis that the mining industry is facing is through direct government intervention.

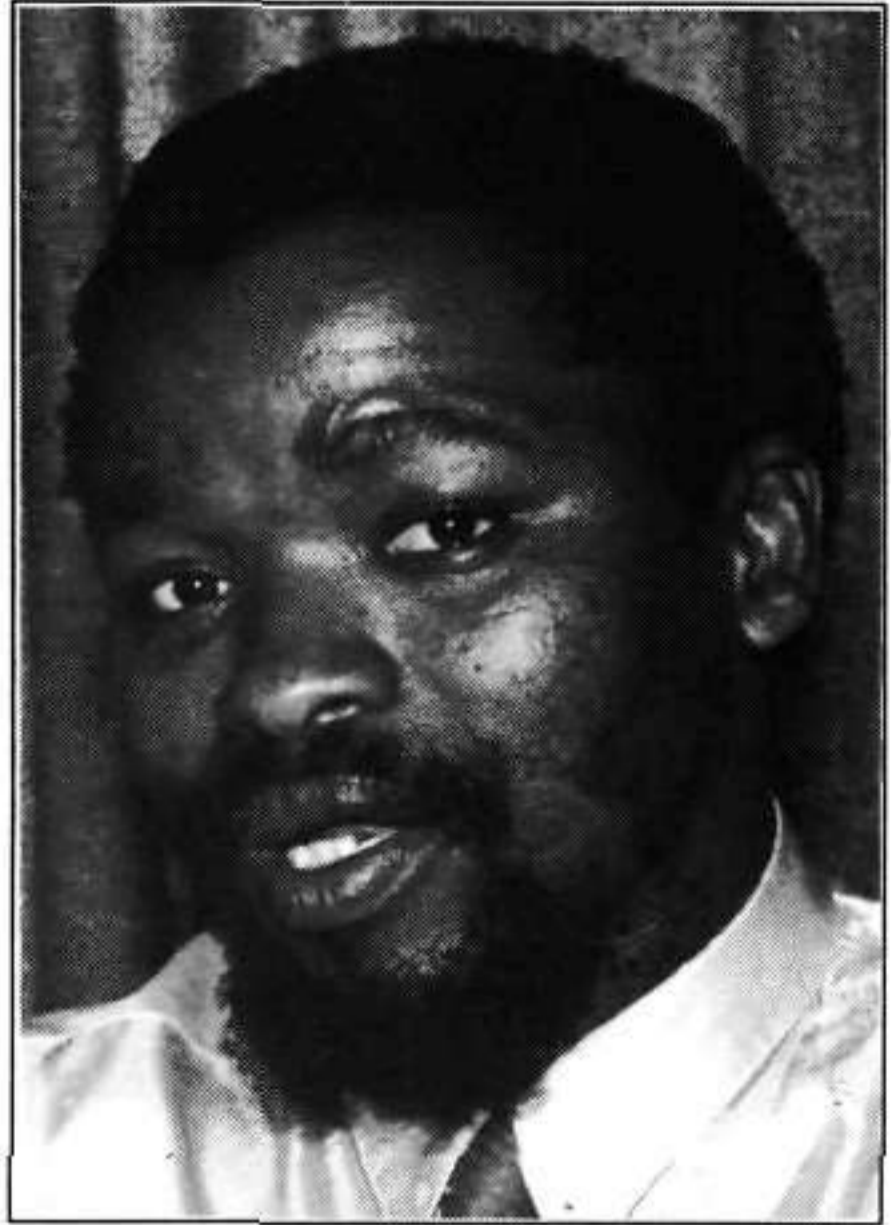
Independence and the Alliance

As the national organiser of NUM I don't think it would correct for me to talk about my own involvement in political organisations. So I want to restrict comments about myself just to my involvement in the NUM and the trade union movement.

But speaking broadly, I would say that trade unions must always remain independent - they should never be a conveyor belt of the ANC or the SACP. Unions have a role to play now and they will have a role to play in the future even should the ANC come into power. This is a watchdog role which will always be necessary. Unions will have to continue to fight for the interests of workers.

There is a lot of debate around, some saying we should just build the ANC, others saying we must concentrate on the SACP because they are the vanguard of the working class. Others think we must just concentrate on trade union work.

My view is that before we become workers, we are residents and so it is important to participate in the mass-based formations in the areas where we are staying. As workers we are also citizens, so we should become active members



of the ANC - and be prepared to provide leadership to the ANC. As members of the working class, it is important to join the SACP in our thousands. If we want the party to exist, we must join it and lead it.

There's nothing like a 'too many hats' debate as far as I am concerned. People are starting to think we are in a post-apartheid society. We are not, and so we still need to fight. Only in a post-apartheid South Africa, where ANC and SACP members may become members of parliament, will two hats be an issue. It will, of course, at that stage be incorrect for union leaders to take full-time positions in political organisations.

People do have genuine concerns about comrades having too many positions in different organisations and therefore not being effective in any of them. But the question is not of too many caps, it is the question of time and availability.

My job and my family

My job is a demanding one, but fortunately this does not threaten my home life. We have two kids and we live in Vosloosrus. The family is stable and my wife understands the situation. There were problems, in the past, especially around 1987, but now everything has settled down very well. ☆