

Strike Facts:

The Workers' Story



Waiting for the bus and thinking of the future

MORE THAN 28 000 mineworkers went on strike on September 1 and 2 at seven General Mining Union Corporation Limited (Gencor), three Gold Fields of South Africa and one Anglovaal mines, after they refused to increase their wage offer in line with the other mining houses — Anglo American Corporation (AAC), Johannesburg Consolidated Investments (JCI) and Rand Mines.

Strikes took place at:

Transvaal Navigation Collieries (TNC) — 1 500; Matla Collieries — 2 000; Marievale Gold Mine — 1 200; Beatrix Gold Mine — 7 000; Blinkpan Collieries — 1 500; Stilfontein Gold Mine — 400 and St Helena Gold Mine of Gencor — 9-10 000; Anglovaal's Hartebeesfontein — 2 000; Gold Fields' West Driefontein Gold Mine — few hundred; Kloof Gold Mine — 1-2 000 and Deelkraal Gold Mine — 7 000.

About 1 800 mineworkers were dismissed, 80 arrested and 30 injured in a harsh display of management, police and mine security brutality. Although no-one was killed, the heavy-handed action of management, police and the security forced the union to suspend the strike and continue the battle in court to avoid further injury and dismissal of mineworkers.

Many questions have been asked about what went wrong. Why did the East and West Driefontein mines in Carletonville and others, which had planned to strike, not come out? And why did Blinkpan, Beatrix and Deelkraal mines, which were not on the planned strike list, strike? Was the union prepared for the strike? And was the strike a victory or a defeat?

History of Struggle

The offer by AAC, JCI and Rand Mines was clearly an attempt to divide the membership of the union. But, it also showed our organised strength at these mines which forced the bosses to improve their offer. Last year's legal strike proved that

we had lots of support in these mines, when more than 70 000 mineworkers supported our call for a strike. AAC, in particular, attempted a settlement on the last hour when they realised how big the strike was going to be. For AAC it was clear that we could bring out all the workers on their mines alone.

Super profits

Because the mining industry made superior profits — over the last year — it was cheaper to settle than run the risk of a big strike. The mass dismissals earlier this year at Vaal Reef's Gold Mine also proved a costly exercise in an attempt to discipline the union. It took the mining bosses millions of rands in lost production to prove their point! But they never learn. Mine unionisation is here to stay. And, the NUM is here to stay. And mineworkers are prepared to die for their union and its cause.

While mass dismissals are major setbacks, they are merely temporary. This is clear from Vaal Reef's where union membership has been regained.

Verkrampste mining houses

Gencor, Anglovaal and Gold Fields Mining Houses have a history of anti-unionism and verkramptheid. They have made many efforts and tried many times to undermine the NUM at their mines. This includes harassing shaft stewards, parading active union members, not giving the union meeting places and physically crushing the miners' resistance.

During earlier strikes, they forced the miners back to work at gunpoint.

Struggle

But the mineworkers at Gold Fields, Gencor and Anglovaal have continued to struggle to win trade union rights. They know that it is only through struggle that they will get their rights.

This year alone, more than 50 000 mineworkers have been involved in strike action at these mines. Many of the strikes were planned while others

were not. But all were aimed at the bad working and living conditions on their mines and their anti-union policies. The strikes include:

- East Driefontein Gold Mine's 12 000 mineworkers in February, which resulted in over 800 dismissed and 19 shaft stewards arrested. The whole branch leadership was lost in the strike.
- Kloof Gold Mine's 13 000 mineworkers in February.
- Winkelhaak, Braken, Leslie and Kinross Gold Mines brought out more than 28 000 on July 1, in response to the wage increases in the

industry.

In these strikes the police and mine security injured many workers. The bosses also dismissed many active union members and shaft stewards. The attitude of the bosses was clearly to show their power and show who is "boss". This was also said by the Gencor executive director, Mr Johan Fritz.

"It is important to remain consistent with black employees and not vacillate. Blacks have a different cultural approach. They want to know exactly where you stand, otherwise they lose confidence in you."



Marievale workers evicted from hostel

Leadership lost

In many cases, the most important and experienced union leadership was lost. This was a major blow to the union. The plan to strengthen the union at shaft level was set back many months. The fired union leadership was one problem which affected the strike in September.

There were also four other factors which affected the way the strike went: communication problems between shaft stewards and the rank and file because the bosses refused to allow report-back meetings, strong-arm tactics by the police and mine security, when dealing with the mineworkers. This included:

- sjambokking
- teargas attacks
- forcing workers back to work at gunpoint
- detaining the shaft stewards

The mass sackings and threats by the mine bosses also affected how the strike went. This is because the bosses see the mining industry more as a military camp. A Fritz of Gencor put it:

"Mining operations are conducted more in a military manner than other industrial activities. We have a shield against (sic) irresponsible action (strikes) — a large reserve of unemployed."

Lastly, by giving the bosses notice of when and where the workers were going to strike, allowed them to prepare themselves. They brought all the ammunition and hardware they needed to crush a strike. The police also played their part. They picked up comrades Paul Nkuna, regional secretary of the Witwatersrand region and Kenny Mosime of the Legal Department for questioning about the strike. Death threats were also received by the union's vice president, comrade Elijah Barayi.

The strike was very effective at mines not on the strike list. Because the bosses were not prepared, it was more difficult to break the strike before it started.

It is clear that the bosses and the state work hand in hand. The workers have no protection, when they go out on a legal strike. When the bosses can't handle their workplace problems, they call the police. So it seems clear that, whether it is a legal or illegal strike, the mine bosses still call in the police.

Legal machinery

More and more workers are asking what the point is of going through all the stages of negotiations to get their demands met. And, when they decide to strike, they are not given protection by the law. The law favours the bosses and they have the police to enforce it.

The workers only have the strike weapon. It is accepted as legitimate, elsewhere, that workers use it when they wish to apply pressure on management to get their demands met. Because, during a strike the workers lose wages, while the bosses lose profits. The bosses must realise that they do not solve the problem by dismissing workers. It will only discourage the workers from using the collective bargaining machinery. And more wildcat strikes will take place.

Legal protection when on strike is the demand of all workers

Exactly what happened on the various mines is told by the workers below.